

MANHUNT

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35 CENTS

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STORY NEW!



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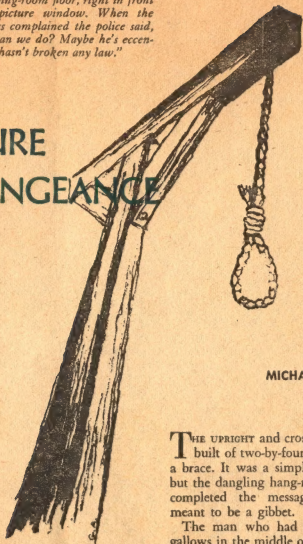
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He built a gallows tree in the middle of his living-room floor, right in front of the picture window. When the neighbors complained the police said, "What can we do? Maybe he's eccentric. He hasn't broken any law."

PURE VENGEANCE



BY
MICHAEL ZUROY

THE UPRIGHT and cross arm were built of two-by-fours, joined by a brace. It was a simple structure, but the dangling hang-man's noose completed the message. It was meant to be a gibbet.

The man who had set up this gallows in the middle of his living-room surveyed it with satisfaction. He rose clumsily. There was no

grace or vigor in his movements; he was slope-shouldered and chubby, with the bottom heaviness of a man averse to physical activity. He was as painfully groomed as an amateur actor at an audition, wearing newly purchased lounge clothes, his thin, mousy hair lotioned and shiny.

He grasped the cord of the closed blind. The room behind him was brightly lit with high wattage bulbs. When he raised the blind, every detail, of the gibbet, would be starkly visible from outside.

Outside, the night was new, and the small, low-priced development homes were still lighting up, block after block of them. They were cast from the same mold, with a few minor variations, and in most of them the same activities were taking place: at this hour of the evening, meals were being prepared, children were coming in from play, infants were being readied for bed, and men were beginning to open their doors, trickling home from work and business.

Only this one house contained a lone man without a family.

Now the unveiling, the man was thinking. He pulled up the blind.

He crossed to a chair, took up a book, and assumed a reading position. He knew that soon the scene he was presenting would be noticed from the street and from the houses opposite. The house directly across the street would have the best view.

Busy with caring for her two year old daughter and with preparing dinner, the woman of that house was not at first aware of anything strange. Her own blinds down, feeling secure within the cozy limits of her home, she moved about, absorbed and content. It was the husband, returning from his labors at the iron works, who noticed the show. Two or three people on the street had already stopped to stare. He did the same, and then ran into his house and dragged his wife to the window, raising a slat of the blinds.

"It's him," he said. "Ain't it, Hilda? Ain't it him?"

The woman seemed unable to answer. She stared through the opening in the blind as though fascinated. A few drops of sweat accumulated while cooking began to drip unnoticed onto her well-shaped lips. She was a dark-haired woman in her early thirties with a pretty face and a figure that was still trim and shapely, even in house dress and apron.

The husband, great and hulking next to her, with large, brutal features that held a certain shallow type of good looks, scowled darkly. "Sure, it's him," he said. His voice was rough and lip-lazy, made rougher by his practice of yelling across the din at the iron-works. "Look at when he turns his head. Can't be nobody but him."

"Yes," said the woman. "It's George."

"Well, what's he up to? What's the idea of the neck-stretcher?"

Suddenly the woman laughed hysterically. "He found us, Tony. It took him three years, but he found us. And all the time I thought we were rid of him and done with him he's been searching, searching and dreaming how to get even."

"Get even! I'd like to see him try."

"Isn't he trying, Tony? Isn't he? Isn't he threatening us right now in his crazy way?"

"I don't see any sense in it. What's he going to do with that gallows? Hang himself?"

"Maybe," said the woman. "Maybe, right in front of us, so we'll never forget it."

The husband laughed. "Won't bother me none."

"But I don't think that's it," said the woman. "I know him, Tony. He means us harm. There's something bad behind this, and he doesn't mean for us to understand it right away. He wants to worry us and torture us."

Tony said scornfully, "He ain't going to worry me. I'll just lean on him."

"He bought that house, without our suspecting. The Healy's told me they'd had a good offer through an agent. I didn't dream George was behind it. If he'd go to that much trouble he's scheming something terrible. Tony, I'm scared."

"Of what? Of that puny jerk? I'll kill him."

"I wish you could," said his wife earnestly. "I wish you could walk over there right now and kill him right before my eyes. I'd like him to be dead. But we can't think that way, Tony."

Tony looked at his wife oddly. "Don't take me so serious. Of course, I ain't going to kill him."

"We can't ask the police for protection either. He might tell them —about me."

Startled, Tony turned his head. "That's right," he said slowly. "Suppose he does anyhow?"

"He could have by now, if that was what he wanted. He's got something else in mind, something much worse." The woman's eyes were still fixed on the bright room across the street with its figure reading in the comfortable chair, not looking their way, with its ominous gibbet standing tall and dark. Outside, a small crowd of neighbors and passers-by was beginning to gather. She could hear their voices, puzzled, curious, indignant, serious, joking. She and Tony alone realized that the gibbet was a message of vengeance directed at them, that in some hidden way it was meant to hurt them.

The phone rang. It was Bertha Hawlek, her neighbor across the driveway, who, despite the proximity of the houses often phoned when she had something to say. "Boy," said Bertha's penetrating voice from the receiver, "we sure got a dilly this time. You've noticed

that exhibition across the street, I suppose? Looks like a real nut moved into our block. He's not hiding anything, is he, with all the blinds up and the place lit like a circus? I understand he's alone, no family, and no wonder, who'd want a creep like that? Personally, I think we ought to call the cops . . ."

Complaints, thought Sergeant Pfister, always complaints. He didn't mind the legitimate ones, that's what he was there for. It was the petty, crack-pot complaints that kept pouring in, drowning the real ones, that made him a tired man. Of course, for the chronic complainers there was the special phone treatment in which he side-tracked the call to an extension serviced by a recording which responded with an occasional "Yeah," and other suitable remarks. But when they came in person there was nothing he could do but listen.

Pfister was a man who, despite his eighteen years on the force, was not good at concealing his feelings. He was a good man, grave and unflagging in the performance of his duty, tough but fair with law-breakers. He had been in many fights and gun-battles and had been wounded three times. As he saw it, this was his job, to uphold the law and combat crime. He believed in simple, direct action. He resented bush-beating and involvement; that was for the detective department. He was not inclined to interfere

with the affairs of private citizens, including neighborhood quarrels, as long as the law was not flouted.

Now, distaste and boredom were plainly written on his round, sagging face. His small, extremely blue eyes stared unwaveringly at the three women and one man that stood before his desk, the deputation from Maplecrest Avenue. He said: "We've already looked into the matter, right after the first complaints from you people. Patrolmen Kane and Appleby talked to the man. They think he's eccentric, but that's all. They don't feel he intends suicide."

"But Sergeant," burst out the Hawlek woman, "who knows what he intends? The man's surely not normal, displaying that gallows every night."

"Not normal?" growled Sergeant Pfister. "I wish I had a penny."

"Look here," said the man, a Mr. Baker. "Surely, you're not going to ignore this. It's a very unsettling business. We had a pleasant community before this man came. Now there are people in the streets every night, watching, waiting for something to happen. The morbidly curious are hoping to see him hang himself. The whole block is tense. It's very bad for our children. Even our real estate values are being affected."

"Have you talked to the man?"

"Of course we've tried talking to him. He refused to explain the

ghastly display. We asked him to at least keep his blinds down. He refused again, quite politely, but firmly."

"Any indecency?"

"No, he's always properly dressed. But there must be some action you can take, Sergeant."

Sergeant Pfister said, "Don't bet on it. The police can't tell a man how to furnish his home. And we can't tell him to keep his blinds closed if there's no immorality involved."

"But he's a public nuisance! Isn't that grounds for police action?"

Pfister knitted his brow. This thing was becoming increasingly irritating. Actually, he wasn't entirely sure what to do. This was beyond his experience. He hated these crack-pot situations. He'd like to pass the buck to the detectives or to his superiors, but there wasn't enough in the case to warrant it. He'd just get laughed at.

"If you don't do something," said the Hawlek woman, "we'll take the case to the newspapers. We'll take it to the courts. We'll take it to the City Hall, if necessary."

Pfister regarded her sourly. She would, too. He didn't want to be accused of neglecting his duty.

"I regard the man as a danger, an absolute danger," put in one of the other women, a sharp nosed female who resembled a mosquito. "He's deranged, and that noose is obviously a threat. I'm sure he intends to use it on somebody, heaven

knows who or why. How do we know he isn't going to strangle one of our children?"

"All right," growled Pfister. "I'll look into it. Personally. This afternoon."

"Please," said Mrs. Hawlek. "He's making all of us nervous. Why, my neighbor, Hilda—Hilda Doanes—looks simply terrible. As though she hasn't slept a wink for over two weeks, since he moved in. Her house faces his, you know."

A faint spark of interest crossed Pfister's bloomy consciousness. "That so? Then why isn't she complaining?"

"She certainly should be, don't you think? I really don't understand Hilda, sometimes. She won't help at all. Some people expect others to fight their battles for them."

"Sure," said Pfister, the spark dying. A note of dismissal entered his voice. "O.K., I'll look into it."

This couldn't go on, Hilda Doanes thought. She'd lose her mind. Maybe that was what George was trying for. That dirty, slimy George, who would have expected he'd have the nerve?

Life was a sick thing now, knowing that George was always there, alone, in the house across the street, rarely going out, calmly waiting to get even.

She couldn't stay away from her windows. She ought to ignore him, but the windows drew her. Occasionally, during the day she caught a glimpse of him moving

about. At night, that gallows was always waiting for her look, with George usually sitting around and that smug, fattish look on his face that she had never been able to stand and that she would like to kick in with the point of her shoe.

Funny that, out of all the men she had known, she had gotten so tied up with George. It couldn't have happened except that he'd met her during one of her low spells, and the security he'd offered had looked good at the time.

This fantastic gallows spectacle! She and Tony had beaten their brains out trying to figure it, and all they had was a lot of wild guesses. Surely George didn't expect them to walk over and hang themselves. And he wasn't man enough to put a noose around their necks, if that was what he was trying to threaten. Was it only a symbol of revenge meant to get on their nerves? If so, it was succeeding.

She had tried to have it out with George. She had seen him in the street a few times; tried to talk. He had looked right through her and passed by.

Once, braving the neighbors' curiosity, she had even rung his bell. Answering the door, he had looked at her without the slightest trace of recognition. He hadn't asked her in; he merely barred the way and politely inquired her business. Her voice low, she had demanded to know what he wanted from them.

His eyes could be so dark and

bird-like in their glassiness. They showed nothing. He acted as though he hadn't heard her. He merely said, "Sorry I can't help you, ma'am," and shut the door in her face.

She had had to restrain Tony. After a while, Tony had been wild to beat up George. She hadn't dared let Tony get near the man. It would only have plunged them into trouble with the law.

They had even considered selling out and moving. But Tony wouldn't be chased, after they had worked so hard to settle themselves here. And besides, George would only have caught up with them again.

No, Hilda thought, they'd have to end this thing now, somehow.

Her face softened as little Roanna clutched her leg. Her two year old child had been trying to get her attention. Hilda regarded the girl affectionately, glad for an instant to get her mind off George. Roanna looked so cute in her red pants and pink striped blouse. Impulsively, Hilda hugged her daughter. Hers and Tony's. She was grateful that she'd had no child with George. She wouldn't want to breed anything like George.

His touch on her body. Those soft, distended fingers. Like fat slugs. Each time had been a crawling horror. And his constant talk of love. Pleading, hurt eyes. Could he actually have expected her to love him?

Hilda glanced out the window

again, and her face grew sharp and intent. A car was parking in front of the house across the street. A police car. The cop that was driving remained at the wheel, but the other one got out and mounted the steps. Looked like a sergeant. Maybe they were going to take George away. She allowed herself that wild hope.

Sergeant Pfister rang the bell and waited on the tiny, roofed concrete slab that the builders had madly described as a patio. His eyes traced the wandering line of a crack in the brick veneer front of the undersized ranch type house. The door opened and his eyes jerked to the man that stood there.

"George Raber?" inquired Pfister.

"Oh, police again," said the man, not looking surprised. "Well, come in." His voice was soft and blurry.

Following Raber, one step took the Sergeant through the entry and into the living room. At once he saw the crude gibbet.

Pfister was inclined to the quick, direct attack. A crushing manner often worked. His bellow was meant to be obeyed. "You'll have to get rid of that."

"Why?" Raber's face seemed impassive, unaffected.

"You know damn well that gallows is disturbing people."

Raber met his thrusting look blandly. "Gallows? Oh, that? Now that you mention it, I suppose it might be mistaken for a gallows."

"Mistaken? What else in sam hill could it be?"

"Oh, a lot of things. It could be a napkin rack. Or it could be a perch for the parakeet I might get."

"What are you trying to give me?"

"Sergeant," said Raber softly, "do you know what I see when I look at you?"

"What?" answered Pfister, startled.

"I see courts. I see judges. I see juries. District attorneys. Now, in view of that, do you expect me to talk to you like a human being? No, Sergeant, to you I talk for the record. Am I breaking some law by keeping this parakeet perch in my home?"

Momentarily speechless, Sergeant Pfister glared.

"You can't actually classify this useful ornament as a weapon," Raber went on gently. "Certainly not as a concealed weapon. What legal objection can you have to it? If it makes people uncomfortable, I suggest that they mind their own business."

"Then why don't you keep your blinds down like a decent man?"

Raber smiled. "I prefer them up. In fact, if I wanted to take them off altogether, that would be my right, wouldn't it, Sergeant? You'd have to support me in that, wouldn't you?"

Feeling that he was fighting a losing battle, as he had felt from the start, and wishing he was out of

this, Pfister roared. "Don't get so smart. Don't give me technicalities. You know and I know and everybody else around here knows that you're maintaining a deliberate nuisance. I don't know why; but it's gone far enough. Now, why don't you be a good fellow, and cut it out?"

Raber made no answer. The smile remained on his lips.

"What the hell do you get out of being a troublemaker?" rasped Pfister.

The furniture in the room was a mismatched collection that looked as though it had been picked up haphazardly at a second-hand warehouse. Raber lowered himself into a scarred maple rocker with a rent in its upholstery. "Sit down, Sergeant," he invited.

After a puzzled look, the Sergeant sat.

"I have a wife," Raber said. "She's not living with me." A sad note had crept into his slow voice.

The Sergeant regarded him stonily. A queer bird, this. What was he getting at now?

"I loved my wife, Sergeant," said Raber. "Did you ever love a woman?" Not receiving an answer, he went on: "She's a pretty woman, the prettiest woman I was ever able to approach. Somehow, most pretty women don't seem to like me. Maybe you can understand why, Sergeant, not being me. Me, I don't understand it.

"She was a bum when I married

her. You know? The kind that perches in bars picking up men. The free-lance type, out for what they can take plus kicks and drinks. I knew it, all right, but I overlooked it. We'd bury the past, we agreed. I married her because she fascinated me, the way she was built, the way she moved, the way she thought and talked. I wanted to keep her, understand Sergeant?

"I guess she married me for security. I understood that, but I figured in time she'd learn to care for me. But it didn't work that way.

"I tried. I tried my hardest to please her. Anything she wanted, if it was in my power, I gave her. Nothing helped. Her indifference just seemed to change to contempt. She hardly allowed me to touch her. She began playing around again, seeing other men.

"What was I to do, Sergeant? Kill her? Beat her up? Throw her out? I wanted her. I loved her. I did nothing."

Pfister squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. Intimate confessions always made him uncomfortable. It was indecent to listen to a man bare his emotions. Still, it was his duty to listen if it helped explain a case.

"Finally," said Raber, "she went plain crazy over one of her men. It seems, he felt the same way about her. He was willing to marry her, if I would let her go. I couldn't give her up, Sergeant. I begged her to stay with me. I pleaded. I got down on my knees, actually down on my

knees, and cried, that's how much I loved her."

Pfister squirmed again. "I don't know why you're telling me this," he said. "Don't you have any pride?"

"Pride?" Raber's mouth took on a cynical curve. "I don't believe in pride, Sergeant. What's pride but another obstacle in a man's own way? Pride and shame and this thing called self-respect, all weaknesses that hold a man back. I spent my childhood scrounging in the streets for food, like a rat, Sergeant. What would pride have done for me then?"

"What are you trying to tell me, Raber?"

"Listen, Sergeant. Even my tears wouldn't move her. But I could refuse to give her a divorce, and so she's still legally my wife. She ran off with this man, of course. Brazenly, as though I weren't her husband, he came and took her away, and threatened to break my neck if I tried to interfere. Callously, this stupid brute walked in and broke up my life. They live across the street now."

Raber said this last so softly that it was several moments before Pfister got the significance. When he did, he remembered the glimmer he had gotten when the Hawlek woman had mentioned her neighbor, Hilda Doanes. Funny thing, a cop's instinct. He felt a sense of relief. This thing was maybe making some sense.

"So you're out to settle a grudge, eh?" Pfister said severely. "So that's what this show's about."

Raber's eyes lifted in mock surprise. "I didn't say so, did I, Sergeant? For the record, please remember that I never said that. I simply told you a story, one that you'd learn anyhow in time. It seems to me that you've missed the point of the story."

"Well, what the hell is the point?"

"A woman can't be married to two men at the same time, can she? And Hilda did marry Tony Doanes as she wanted to do. I checked that."

It came as a jolt. Pfister had been thinking along different lines. He said uncertainly, "Bigamy?"

"I can substantiate it. A crime, I think. I believe you have an unpleasant duty to take care of, Sergeant."

A little later, Hilda Doanes saw the Sergeant leave George's house and walk across the street towards her own . . .

Tony Doanes was a busy man for a day or so, what with providing for the care of Roanna, seeing lawyers and raising bail. After Hilda was released on bail and he had brought her back home, he told her savagely, "I'm going across the street and kill that louse."

Pale and tense, Hilda said wearily, "Tony, Tony, we're in enough trouble already. Don't touch him."

"Well, what in Christ does he

want from us? He won't face us like a man; he keeps slapping away at us. Do we have to sit here and take it?" Tony flipped open the blinds. Night had come, and the brilliantly lit room across the street struck their eyes with its usual shock. The gibbet cast its black shadows. George sat calmly in his chair, reading. "He's still at it. Do we have to look at that forever? What's he got in mind?"

Hilda took hold of the blind cords and slowly drew them shut. She said, "No, we don't have to look at that, and we won't. Let's keep our heads, Tony. If he's trying to break us down, the best thing we can do is ignore him. We're not going to look out the window at night any more."

"And what about this bigamy rap?"

"We've got a good lawyer. Maybe it'll work out. They can't keep us apart, Tony."

For several nights, Hilda and Tony stayed away from the window, although their imaginations pulled them towards it. What was he doing, they wondered? Had anything changed?

Then came the night that Bertha Hawlek phoned, her voice almost hysterical. "God," she moaned, "it looks like Roanna. I can't believe it. They're calling the police now. If they'd only stopped the madman when we asked them to . . . Hilda, you poor . . ."

Hilda dropped the phone, rushed

to the window and flung open the blind. Her hands went to her cheeks and she shrieked.

A figure was now dangling in the gallows. A child's figure, curiously limp, its neck askance in the noose, slowly twisting back and forth. It was the size of a two year old, Roanna's size, and it wore red pants and a pink, striped blouse, exactly like Roanna's. George sat in his chair, near it, reading.

The watchers outside were rapidly swelling into a muttering crowd.

"Roanna!" shrieked Hilda. "Tony!"

Dimly, she was aware of Tony at her side, then running somewhere. This, she thought hysterically, was what George had been after. Smugly, knowing that he was going to take away her little baby, he had sat there night after night, displaying the murder weapon, and she had been too blind to understand it. She should have let Tony stamp him out; instead she had cringed with fright. Roanna, Roanna, my baby, I've failed you.

Tony had returned and she grew conscious that he was shaking her. "Hilda," he was yelling. "Hilda, listen. Roanna's safe. I just checked. She's in her room. She's all right, understand? That's not our baby."

As the crowd watched, George rose under the glaring lights, went to the hanging figure, and picked it up. Its face could be clearly seen. A man outside yelled, "It's a doll. Just a doll." George set it to twist-

ing again and returned to his seat.

"I'm going over there," said Tony thickly.

Still shocked, still staring at the twisting doll, Hilda made no answer.

"He's doing that to torture us," Tony said. "Special, for us. I'm going over and beat him to a pulp."

"Go ahead," Hilda said suddenly. "I want to see that. I want to see blood on that fat face. I want to see broken teeth in that wet mouth. I want to see his belly caved in and I want to hear him screaming. Go ahead, Tony."

Hilda watched her husband across the street to the house and push on the door. When it didn't give, he jabbed his finger on the bell and kept it there. With the watching crowd, she saw George rise unhurriedly and cross the room to answer the ring.

George opened the door and stepped backwards.

Everybody heard George's voice, high and loud. "You can't come in. I refuse you entry. If you walk in, you're trespassing."

Tony strode in, and like a wolf, hunted down the retreating, chubby figure. In the living-room, he caught him and struck, and the crowd saw George fall heavily. Tony drew back his foot for a kick,

but stopped abruptly.

George had drawn an automatic.

George Raber, holding his licensed gun, spoke very softly to the big man looming over him. "I've been waiting for you. I've been waiting and waiting. Why didn't you come sooner? I finally had to use the doll. I was afraid they would stop me before you came."

Raber fired into Tony's body, and as it jerked back, fired three more shots. He wanted to be quite sure of killing Tony. Then he took a chair and sat beside the body, smiling to himself, waiting for the police.

It had gone nicely. The brilliant lights had shown every detail to the witnesses outside. Since he had first revealed the gallows, the lights and witnesses had been waiting.

Only Tony had been needed to complete the show. He had known that the threatening display would finally fetch Tony, furious and violent, like the bully boy he was. There would be no question about it before any court. Tony Doanes, although refused entry, had attacked him in his own home, and he had been forced to shoot the man in self-defense.

All proper and legal. Arranged, as one might say, under police supervision.



County Jail
Pine Tree Lake, N.Y.
November 10

Mr. Philip Carrington
c/o Talmage Powell

Dear Sir :

I HARDLY KNOW how to begin this letter. I've never asked anyone for help before. I'd rather help other people. But you are the best defense lawyer in these parts from all I hear, and I am surely desperate.

All this is so new to me, Mr. Carrington. In all my 23 years I've never been in trouble, not even a parking ticket. And now they have me in this jail under suspicion of murdering my dear husband. It's all so fearful and strange that I'm addlebrained, and my heart is broken on account of anyone would even think such a thing of me.

I couldn't do anything but sit and cry until I thought of writing you this letter. I won't blame you if you don't see fit to help me. After all, I'm a stranger to you. But please hear my story before you throw my letter in the wastebasket.

I'm just a little old southern girl from down in Centerville, South Carolina, where I lived all my life until I met this Mr. Amos Singleton.

How I met him was through a correspondence club. It was so lonely down there in the sandy country, and all the mature men were married. I lived with my dear, ailing mother, and I found most of the boys my age were just wolves with a single thought in their minds. They couldn't

understand that just because a honey blonde with blue eyes *looked* real sexy, it didn't mean she didn't want to develop her mind.

Amos (my heart breaks at the thought of his sweet name) was a retired fellow who had owned a fertilizer factory. His wife had passed on and he was as lonely as me. After we came to appreciate each other through our letters, he took a trip down to Centerville and we got married.

Our bliss was all too short. He said I had lit all the fires of his youth again, and to me he was a darling.

We vacationed at Pine Tree Lake, and that's how the trouble started. My cousin Ruel had come up to pay us a visit, and just a few days ago Amos fell out of the boat and was drowned in the lake. It don't seem real. I'm glad the details are blurred in my mind, or I'd just go crazy, I guess.

There was this tramp sleeping off a drunk in the woods near the lake and he told a pack of lies that got me and Cousin Ruel in this trouble. He said Cousin Ruel pushed Amos from the boat and wouldn't let him get out of the water. The truth, the whole truth believe me Mr. Carrington, is that Ruel grabbed for him when Amos slipped. Then Ruel jumped in the water because Amos wasn't much of a swimmer. Ruel might have saved him only poor Amos lost his head and started fighting.

I couldn't understand why this tramp should tell such lies. Maybe he was still a little drunk. Or his mind just works that way. There are all kinds of minds in this world. (Which a dummy like me shouldn't be telling a distinguished and brilliant lawyer like you.)

Anyhow, this tramp is being kept like a trusty here, getting good food and lodging. And I try to understand him and forgive him and hold no bitterness in my heart, the way my mother always taught me.

I haven't much money, on account of Amos, after his wife died, changed his will to leave his fortune to a foundation that does scientific work. I didn't know anything about the will, or his personal business. Those weren't the things that interested me in him. We were married such a short time I guess Amos didn't get around to making a second change in his will, which is why I am left friendless and in desperate need in this strange place.

Maybe it's wrong of me even to hope—but if you'll just give me a word of encouragement I'll feel like the whole world isn't against me and I'll be grateful to my dying day.

Yours respectfully,
Trudy Bell Singleton

County Jail
Pine Tree Lake, N. Y.
November 14

Dear Mr. Carrington,
I'm all choked up, thinking

About your visit. I'll never forget how stern you looked when you first got here. You said, "See here, young lady, I couldn't turn my back on your letter and ignore it, but it doesn't mean I'm taking your case."

Oh, Mr. Carrington, right then it was just enough to have somebody in the outside world know I was alive. Like I explained, I had nobody. My poor mother has a terrible heart condition down in Centerville, South Carolina, and if she knew what trouble has come upon me, the shock might kill her, and I reckon I'd die to keep that from happening.

It seemed like your presence filled this jail cell full of sunshine. I don't want you to think I'm forward. I'm not, really. But I have to be honest. My mother says it's a virtue I carry to excess sometimes, but I can't help it. In all honesty I'll have to say I've never met a man like you, only in story books. You're so intelligent and strong and cultured looking with your gray hair and those little lines in your face. I swan, I can picture you as a statesman, sitting on the veranda of a southern mansion sipping a little old julep while you think about the problems of the world.

It was so wonderful, having you gradually change your mind while we sat and talked in the jail cell. Know what? I'm going to ignore your sweet warnings not to get my hopes too high. I know everything

is going to be all right, now that you have taken my case.

Warm regards,
Trudy

County Jail
Pine Tree Lake, N.Y.
November 18

Dear Mr. Carrington,

I haven't slept a wink all night, and I don't much care what happens to me now. I'll never blame you for changing your mind, and I won't blame that jailer for his gossip, either. I guess the jailer had it in for me, on account of he thought he could take certain liberties with my present position, if you know what I mean. And he got his face slapped good and hard and the sheriff threatened to fire him.

Anyhow, I'll treasure our brief acquaintance. I'm innocent, but if I have to pay the price of guilt, I'll remember to the last that I met one real gentleman from a fine old family during my little lifetime.

In fairness to a fellow human being, please try and overcome that automatic dislike for Cousin Ruel that you said you had. And please understand that even a jailer can tell tales, if he has reason. Cousin Ruel is my cousin, really, no matter what the jailer said. He isn't a cheap punk, like the jailer said, only a poor boy from the sandy country who never got no schooling and had fatback with his collards for Sunday dinner when he was little. His folks was hardwork-

ing and it was no fault of theirs. Some of us is just unluckier than others, and I guess Cousin Ruel got born under the wrong sign or something. It's just his luck to have to pay the price of murdering the very man he was trying to save from drowning in the lake.

Bless you, and if you think of me sometime in the future, remember that I'm grateful for the experience of having met you.

Respectfully,
Trudy Bell Singleton

County Jail
Pine Tree Lake, N. Y.
November 23

Dear Philip,

Now I believe in miracles. When I'm sunk in deepest despair, I look up to see you standing outside my cell.

You looked as if you hadn't slept much in the past five nights either. I wondered if it was the same with you as it was with me.

I blush as I write this, but I can't help the way I feel. I just couldn't get you out of my mind. During the last five days the charge of murder hasn't seemed so important as the fact that I'd never see you again. I don't know what's happened to me. I've never felt this way before. Truly, I haven't.

When you battle and win for little old me, I'll never forget that I owe you my very life.

With affection,
Trudy

County Jail
Pine Tree Lake, N. Y.
November 30

Darling Phil,

My thoughts are all of you. I'm not worried about the trial, which is so close now. I know you'll win. I'll remember everything you've said, and all your instructions.

It's kind of strange, but the trial don't matter now. Only you do. I'd do anything if I could help you find the happiness you've been cheated out of.

A jail cell is a heartbreaking place at best. Maybe it's given me deep understanding, for during your last few visits, as we've got to know each other better, I can tell there is turmoil in you, and I do understand.

My life has been a poor one, but yours has had all those restrictions imposed on it. I don't blame you one bit for feeling like your father was a dictator, him forcing you off to Harvard that way when you didn't want to be a lawyer at all. And I'm sure the drinking in your early life was just good, clean fun and not being alcoholic like some of your family tried to say.

You've really been a prince, if you ask me, forcing yourself to live according to all those conventions and marry a girl your father and mother favored and having her run your life so long. It's too bad she couldn't give you any children for then you could have had an outlet for the deep affection you're cap-

able of and which superficial folks just don't know you have or permit you to express.

I think they all should take off their hats to you for making a good lawyer in what you call your later years. It's tough to have to force yourself to stay all bottled up inside all the time. Like you say, it's like being cooped up in a white satin casket.

I don't care what anybody says or thinks. I admire you. To be honest, as I have to be, I might even go a lot further than that if circumstances was different. But I guess when I'm out of this place, I'll have to be as strong as you.

Warmly,
Trudy

Cottage # 14
Lakeside Haven, N. Y.
December 10

Dear Phil,

What a wonderful man you are! I'll never forget the way you crossed that drunk up on the witness stand. He sure had a terrible past record, didn't he? Then how skillful you was when you showed I didn't profit by poor old Amos's death. I didn't know a thing about that will leaving his money to that organization, but a dumb bunny like me could never have been so wise in the use of the will in a courtroom. And the way you disqualified those women jurors and got an all-male jury was a good idea. Believe me, I could see the

way some of those women were looking at me. Some women are unreasonable jealous that way.

I saw your wife in the courtroom while she watched the proceedings. She's not a bit bad looking, considering her age. I wanted to go over and put my arms around her and comfort her and tell her not to let that worried look spoil her nice face. There wasn't a thing to be worried about, I wanted to tell her. I knew all the time you'd win. She sure gave me a lot of attention during the trial, and you tell her for me that I'm grateful she was so interested in my welfare.

Well, it is all over now. I think I had better leave this part of the country soon. Every time I think of you . . . well, I can't help those needles like electricity racing down my back and I feel like I have been through enough torture.

I had to thank you. Knowing you has been an uplifting experience, and I'll never forget you.

With love,
Trudy

Cottage # 14
Lakeside Haven, N. Y.
December 12

Darling,

After you came last night, I sat by the fireplace a long, long time. The cottage was so warm and quiet, tucked in this little glen with the snow falling outside.

I thought of everything you said. I can't help myself either. Today

the cottage seems so bleak and lonely, but I know I won't leave now, no matter how much I try to lecture myself. I know the cottage feels this way because you're not in it.

I guess I got the blues. Do you feel the same kind of agony? What are we going to do?

Your
Trudy

Cottage # 14
Lakeside Haven, N. Y.
December 14

Dearest,

Even though we made up before you left last night, I have to know that everything is better than ever between us. I know you finally said you believed me, but I want to hear it again. That was a man come to fix the wiring you saw leaving last night, just like I said. It wasn't Cousin Ruel at all. Of course I couldn't tell you what he had done to the wiring. My ignorant head doesn't have knowledge about such things. I just know that I smelled smoke and called down to the main cottage and they sent that man up and he said there was a bad wire. It was short, or something. If I had really been trying to hide a visit from Cousin Ruel wouldn't I have thought of a different story?

When you come up tonight, and please come when you get this by the special messenger I'll call up from the main cottage, we're going to dispell a lot of the fears and self-

doubts other people have planted in your mind. You're no more alcoholic than I am, and we're going to have a little old drink of bourbon and prove you can take a social drink and let it go at that. Then you'll see. I'd do anything in the world for you and a little thing like helping you prove yourself is the least I can do in return for all you've done for me.

Expectantly,
Trudy

Cottage # 14
Lakeside Haven, N. Y.
December 21

Darling,

I understand how she can twist it around in her mind like it's for your good. Maybe she really believes that, instead of just wanting to spend all the Christmas holidays in the city.

She's a fine educated woman and I wouldn't criticise her. I know, though, what I would do if I felt like my husband was "off the deep end" like you said that she said. Instead of walking out with the excuse that it was to give him a chance to "revaluate" himself and "get on his two feet" I'd try and understand him. If he enjoyed a little old drink, why, I'd enjoy one with him. And what's the harm in that, I ask you?

Anyhow, other people's business is their own. I know that I feel all excited and tingly about it being nearly Christmas. One thing—don't

you go loading me up with a lot of presents. I have all I want right now.

I bought some new kitchen curtains in the village department store yesterday. They are ducky as can be, but I need a man's help in hanging them. There's only one man in the whole wide world that I can think of. And I'll bet he'd like a dinner of southern fried chicken when the curtains are hung.

You know that talk we had about you setting up the bank account three or four nights ago? Well, with a terrible pang in my conscience, I finally broke down and used the account just a weenie bit today. To buy the curtains and some groceries. You were so masterful in your decision for me not to go away and find a job and there are no jobs in the village and I won't bring it up again, I promise.

Waiting,
Trudy

Cottage # 14
Lakeside Haven, N. Y.
December 28

Darling,

I'm sure that by the time this reaches you at the office you'll be over the jitters and will have remembered that Christmas has come and gone. I was a little worried about you when you left here, but please don't pick on yourself. What you did was perfectly normal. Anybody's liable to tipple a little too

much some time or other, especially during Christmas.

You were sure funny playing Santa Claus! It was on the 23rd instead of Christmas Day, but I didn't care. You were wonderful.

You shouldn't have given me so much, in particular that diamond bracelet. I don't feel the way I do because of the things you can give me, but I won't be dishonest. Nobody else has ever given me very much before—and then to have somebody who thinks enough of me to give me a bracelet like that . . . well, the spots on this paper are tears, not the bad kind, the most joyous tears in the world.

If your law partners get the least bit huffy, you just remember that you don't have to work. You could sleep all day and take trips and do anything you want to instead of being pinned down to that stuffy office.

As always, I won't live during the hours when you're away.

Your possession,
Trudy

P. S. What you said about her coming back was true. I'd just about forgot there'd ever been a wife, any woman other than me.

Cottage # 14
Lakeside Haven, N. Y.
January 8

Dear Mrs. Carrington,

I won't deny that your visit yesterday upset me. I'm just an ignorant little old girl from down in

South Carolina and don't know how to talk like you do.

I don't know how to answer those things you said about Mr. Carrington and me. I can't see that he's "plunged into the gutter" as you put it, "lost his manhood", is "powerless in the hands of a witch with the face of an angel" or "that his very soul is dying within him."

Maybe you read those things in some book. If it makes you feel any better, you have hurt me terribly. I want to cover my ears with my hands to shut out the memory of those things you called me.

Mr. Carrington and I are just friends and that's all there is to it. As you said, he is old enough to be my father, and he has been kind to me and helped me when I was at the end of my tether.

You said you would never give him up as long as breath remained in your body and would never divorce him. Well, I haven't asked him to divorce anybody. You said you hoped your going to the city would shake him to an awareness but now you could see you had been foolish. Again, I don't know what kind of awareness you're talking about, and I didn't ask you to go to the city, did I?

As far as you getting private detectives and putting the law on me, I'm not afraid. For you see, I haven't done anything to be afraid of, and I guess you better think about it before you make Mr. Carrington

wonder what kind of woman you are.

Yours truly,
Trudy Bell Singleton

Cottage # 14
Lakeside Haven, N. Y.
January 10

My poor darling,

Never has anything so wonderful happened between two people. But with tears burning my eyes, the really bad kind this time, I'll have to admit that it's over. I can't stand to see it spoiled and ruined by her.

I guess she can't help it, darling, any more than those spiders you read about, the kind that can't help devouring their mates.

She's out to destroy us, I know, and although I can't understand her hatred of us, I can't let that hatred do what it will to you.

So I'm going away, darling. For your sake. That is, the empty shell of me will take its departure. My heart and my life I leave behind, because they are yours.

Don't try to find me. I couldn't stand the sweet torture of seeing you again, and I'd never find the strength a second time to go away. Please think of me sometimes.

Your despairing,
Trudy

Cottage # 14
Lakeside Haven, N. Y.
January 11

Dear Cousin Ruel,

I'm sending this by special mes-

senger. Give it your quick attention.

Dear Philip just came. He was in a state Drunk and beserk. I quieted him and he is sleeping now for a little while. The poor dear, this is no place for him. I think he'd get along better in some distant spot. like Paris, France. Wonder how a little old girl from down to Centerville will get along in a sophisticated city like that? I guess I'll just have to do the best I can.

and maybe you'll drift along too.

I'm putting a key in this envelope. It's to the Carrington house. She's on an extended trip and just as a favor I think you should clean up any mess you find in the kitchen and dispose of any odds and ends. You're pretty good at that sort of thing. and a snob like her wouldn't want anybody ever to think she'd left her kitchen in a mess.

As ever,
Trudy



It's the Law

Collected by Harold Helfer

In Djambi, Sumatra

from now on an Army man cannot have more than one wife unless he gets written permission from his first wife.

In Medan, Indonesia

known pickpockets are obliged to wear a sign that says: "Hello, hello, I am a pickpocket."

In London, England

Santa Clauses cannot make appearances downtown since there is a law which forbids in that area "fancy dress wholly or mainly for advertising purposes."

In Jamestown, New York

it is illegal to do the shimmy.

In Little Rock, Arkansas

a finance company has no right to seize a lady's car while she's in the bathtub and unable to protest.

In Middlebury, Connecticut

it is no longer necessary for the town to ring a bell every time there's a funeral.

In Washington, D. C.

it is against the law to wear cuff links that discharge gunpowder.

THE DEATH OF EL INDIO



"The Indian" was a great bull-fighter, a hero of the Mexican bull rings. He always cut the heart from the bull he'd killed. He ate it and it gave him strength he said. The crowds roared their approval.

A Novelette

BY

ED LACY

I STEPPED off the plane at Mexico City feeling slightly confused. I like to travel and business was lousy in the States—but there's a wide difference from being a tourist in a foreign country and working there. And on a case I knew nothing about. I'd merely received an airmailed check for \$500, plus a brief letter informing me the check was a retainer if I wanted to accept 'a' case in Mexico.

As I said, things were slow and the money was very good—my client, Mrs. Grace Lupe-Varon, had inherited part of one of the great USA chemical fortunes. All I knew about her was she taught at the university here, and was married to some Mexican newspaper man for the last ten years.

The cabbie steered me to a ritzy hotel, a regular tourist trap. Paying him off, I walked around until I came to a third-rate place called

Prince Montio on Basilo Badillo, located in the center of Mexico City near the two main streets—Avenida Juarez and Reforma. I took a small room with a bath. Being on an expense pad I could have put up at the swank joints like Del Prado, or the Continental, but I'm not at ease in luxury hotels. I hate shaving, for one thing. Also, being a burly type and unable to afford custom-made clothes, I always look like a slob.

The high altitude was already getting to me; I felt sleepy. But I'm not a goof-ball and after washing up, I had the desk clerk—who spoke better English than I do—phone my client. Mrs. Grace Lupe-Varon sounded warm as ice over the phone as she told me to take a cab to her estate on the outskirts of the city. All hackies are frustrated pilots but in Mexico City they drive as if their heap was the only one on the streets. I tried to tell this

idiot to slow down, but he thought I was asking for more speed, so I gazed up at the mountains which surround the valley that is Mexico City, like a hick with a crooked neck—and tried to forget my fear. The driver suddenly turned into a modest driveway, on two wheels—sending me crashing against the side of the cab, then braked to a stop which completely shook me up. He turned and beamed at me with a pleased smile. I was going to tip him with a belt in the puss, but then why complain—I was alive!

The "estate" turned out to be only a modern rambling ranch type bungalow with a small amount of neat lawn around it. Maybe the money wasn't as good as I figured.

Seeing my client was another mild shock—I knew she had to be near my age—creeping toward forty-five—but she looked like a teenager. Grace Lupe-Varon wasn't any show gal, but still slim in tight dungarees with a belt of silver coins, a white boat-neck blouse with more silver gadgets on it, and her skin was burnt a deep tan in contrast to sandy hair almost man-nishly cut around a sharp face. It was more of a 'cute' face than pretty. But her eyes were a mild blue, calm, intelligent peepers . . . and tired ones. Again I wondered about my fee—except for the silver junk, her outfit hadn't cost over ten bucks. She was barefooted—even her nails unpainted.

We were in a room full of odd, modern furniture, and over a cup of strong coffee, she said, in her almost tough voice, "Naturally you must be wondering why I've brought you all the way down here, Mr. Eggers. Why I don't go to the local police."

"Maybe. But I'm not paid to wonder, Mrs. Lupe-Varon, but to . . ."

"Call me Grace. I'll call you Sam."

"Okay, Grace. It isn't so much I wonder why you sent for me, but I wonder what you think I can do here. You understand—I have no legal standing in Mexico, and what's more important in detective work—I've no contacts here, no way of getting quick information. It may take me longer to solve a case and my fee . . ."

"I'm not rushed either for time or money," she said coldly. "I fully realize you'll have to start from scratch, so to speak. Which is the very reason I wanted an investigator from the States—for neither will you be bothered by the national prejudices here." My ugly face must have looked blanker than usual—for she smiled, and her yellowish teeth showed her age. "Sam, suppose back in the States I accused, or rather, hinted some national sports hero—a Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, or Joe Louis, was guilty of murder? It isn't that the police would be inefficient in handling such a grave charge, but on only a hunch and no proof, no one

wishes to even weakly accuse a hero."

I was lost in this maze of words. So it was murder she brought me down here for. I asked, "Take it slow. Who is this big hero?"

"Jose Miguel Cuzo." She said it as if the name should have meant something to me. Then she added, "Every Mexican knows him as the Indian, the sensation of the bull rings, said to be the greatest matador ever. I have no proof—yet—but I *know* he killed my husband!"

Either the altitude, or the thought I'd come on a fool's errand, was making me sweat. "Mrs. . . . Grace, while I'm not trying to talk myself out of a job, I want you to realize what a tough set-up you're handing me. For a private badge to find the answer to murder in the States is rough, and to solve a killing in a foreign country where I don't even speak the language. . . ."

Grace held up her hand, as if quieting a backward boy. "Time doesn't matter to me. I certainly don't expect a solution overnight. Let me fill you in quickly on several basic matters. *El Indio*, as Jose is known, was an unknown matador three years ago. Now bull fighting has certain traditions, rituals. Actually, and I am far from an *aficionado*—for I hate the whole business—the purpose of the *picadors*, the *banderillas*, the cape work, and all the rest, is merely to tire and weaken the poor beast. Then,

once the matador declares he is ready for the kill, the moment of truth as the glorified brutality is called, he has five minutes in which to dispatch the bull. Jose became an overnight sensation two years ago by doing away with the horses, the picadors, the others—in essence he speeded up the ancient 'sport.' Without first tiring the bull, correcting any possible faults in the animal's eyesight, or determining from which side the bull will hook, or trying to have the bull lower his head for the kill . . . the various other technical aspects with which I will not bore you, *El Indio* merely places two *banderillas*—himself—then calls for the sword, and after a few moments of close and daring cape work—makes the kill. He is a young and handsome animal himself, and has completely captured the fancy of the fans. In short, he has become the Babe Ruth of the bull ring. The people practically worship him. Also, he is a very shrewd operator—knows exactly how to appeal to the masses. Take his nickname *El Indio*; to the people this brings to mind Juarez."

"Who's he, another bull fighter?" I asked, politely.

Grace sighed. "Sam, don't you ever go to the movies? I mean . . . Juarez was an Indian who became one of Mexico's great presidents. The Lincoln of Mexico, he's called. You can see the publicity value to Cuzo to be called *El Indio*. Several

other things endear him to the people—for one thing he arrogantly refuses to fight in Spain. Oh, he's a showman. He butchers the dead bulls and gives the meat to the poor, keeping only the heart and the muscles of the hump for himself—claims they keep him strong."

"Sounds like a smart cookie. But what had he to do with your husband?" I asked. "He was a newspaper editor, wasn't he?"

"My Juan was a bull fight critic. He hated *El Indio*, was the only critic who attacked him. He had two reasons—by his first wife he had a daughter, Maria. She married the Indian a year and a half ago. Maria was a lovely wild girl, hardly more than a child. I was very fond of her. But Jose is vain and cruel, had so many women Maria killed herself. Naturally, my Juan loathed Jose for that. Most people thought Juan attacked the Indian in his columns for personal reasons, but in reality—as I know—Juan also hated him because he felt Jose was cheapening and degrading the national sport. Juan felt the Indian was too daring, that he was so good there had to be something phony about him. Juan never ceased his newspaper attacks on *El Indio*, which took courage—several times fans threatened Juan. A few days before my husband died—was killed—he was very excited. He claimed he had proof that Cuzo is a vegetarian—this business about his living on the muscles and the heart

of the bull, was bunk. I don't know if this has any real importance, but two days later Juan was murdered."

She stopped to light a cigarette. Taking another sip of the strong coffee, I asked, "How did your husband die?"

"He died in his bed, bitten by a bush-master, a deadly snake," she said coldly, her eyes watching me for some reaction. I didn't know which way I was supposed to react. There was a moment of silence, then Grace added, "As you'll certainly find out, this has resulted in a scandal. People hint Cuzo is my lover. This is utter nonsense; I've rarely spoken to him, only knew him when he was courting Maria. Also," she took a deep breath revealing tiny, but well rounded, breasts, "I teach zoology at the university, specialize in poisonous snakes—the use of venom for medicine. Sam, do I have to draw a blueprint for you?"

"Not exactly, you headed the suspect parade."

She shook her head. "Only in gossip. Far as the police were concerned, it was all an 'accident,' that the snake had somehow escaped from my lab. Sam, if you're to find the murderer you must believe three things: I sincerely loved my husband and had no interest in Jose; that it wasn't any accident; and the snake was not mine—although I do have bush-masters in my lab downstairs."

"Okay, but could anybody else—

a servant—have left a cage, or whatever you keep the snakes in—open, by mistake?” I asked, getting a funny feeling at the thought of this dainty babe handling snakes.

“No. No one has the key to my lab except myself, and the servants are afraid to step inside, anyway. No snake of mine has ever escaped, either. As a scientist, I must keep an exact count of my specimens. You see why I want Juan’s killer caught—not only for the sake of justice, but to clear the fog of gossip around my name. I consider Mexico my home, I don’t ever want to leave here. I love my work, and the scandal has touched that, too, of course.”

I nodded. “I can see why you want the air cleared, but you don’t give me much to go on.”

“There is one sort of clue.” Grace walked across the room to a desk, moving like a dancer. From a drawer she took out a kind of bamboo cup, handed it to me. “This was found near Juan’s bed that night.”

“What is it?”

She smiled again—middle age galloping across her face. “Exactly what the police asked. It does not belong to anything in our house. From my studies I know that among primitive tribes in Mexico, South America, and in some parts of Africa—wherever they still use hollow bamboo joints for carrying water—there is also a nasty custom of capping a bamboo tube with something like this—after first plac-

ing a deadly snake inside. You then sneak up on a sleeping enemy, dump an angry snake in his lap, or in his bed. I believe that is what happened to my Juan.”

“You had separate bedrooms?”

“Yes. Our work hours conflicted, kept us up late. As this is a one-story house, and previous to this we had no reason to expect anything, it would have been simple for . . . anybody . . . to enter and leave by way of the bedroom windows.” She suddenly let out a nervous laugh. “You look slightly bewildered, Sam. I think that’s enough background for now. Take your time—as long as you get results. Mostly you’ll be on your own, but of course I’ll help in any way I can. Do you carry a gun?”

“Well . . . yes. I probably won’t be able to down here.”

“I’ve already secured a pistol permit for you from the Secretaria de la Defensa Nacional. Be careful, Sam. People who use snakes are far more dangerous than a gunman.”

After she showed me around the house, including the lab with all her evil snakes, I returned to my hotel and started working by going to sleep. The change in climate left me pooped. Late in the afternoon I awoke and walked around town. I felt good. The money was okay, I had a nifty expense account, and figured on stretching the case to a good five grand. Her story was crazy as hell, and even if she didn’t look the part, Grace sounded like

a hysterical housewife. For a hundred a day and expenses, I could listen to silly wives forever.

I walked around Mexico City, passed the *zocalo*, or public square, with the big cathedral on one side and the markets a block away. I walked through the *Alameda*, a neat park, with a great statue of this Juarez guy. I saw hundreds of posters with the Indian's hard, handsome puss staring out at me—he was fighting Sunday, the next day. He had a wide face with high cheek-bones, flat, and skin tight—like the puss of a welter-weight who has difficulty making the weight. Of course a picture on a poster didn't mean a thing, but he was a rough-looking cat.

I wanted to try some *real* Mexican food for supper, but the restaurant I went into was a tourist place and the menu like any eating place in the States. The waiters spoke English and I made a few dumb inquiries about bull fighting. Cuzo was evidently really good, highly thought of. I said something about wanting to meet him and was given the address of his hotel. I walked about again, liking the city more and more. I bought a ticket for the fights and stopped at a sucker bar—strictly tourist bait. But hell, that's what I really was—a dumb tourist . . . with a fat expense account. I had a few shots of a belt called Tequila Grenade—grenadine and grapefruit juice covering the harsh tequila taste. After three of

these I floated back to my hotel. The night was cool, and I fell off into a deep sleep at once.

Sunday morning I was up early, listening to the church bells. I started strolling around the city again, trying to get to know it. This time I walked through an old section, full of miserable slums and narrow streets—the side of Mexico City most tourists rarely saw. I went by Jose's hotel—a crummy looking joint. Although it was early, the hotel was busy—a fat young Mexican was throwing out a dizzy blonde babe. She was a scrawny young bit, about twenty-three, with far too much make-up on. I wouldn't have stopped except she was cursing fatboy—in English and Spanish. She kept trying to get back in and he kept pushing her out the doorway. I couldn't hear what he was calling her, but blondeie was calling him everything but a child of God—and in a big loud voice.

He finally tossed her cheap suitcase at her, smacked her big mouth. I really didn't blame him—not after what she was calling him—but I had a sudden hunch she might be useful, since she spoke English. I'd need a guide for a week or two, until I got the hang of things, and the language. I went over and dumped the lardy Mexican with a left hook. Then I helped the blonde bag of bones to her feet, asked with an awkward bow, "Where can I take you, honey?"

"What is this, USA manhood to the rescue?"

"Something like that. Look, let us scam before he comes to and calls some friends." I picked up her flimsy suitcase.

Brushing off her shabby suit, she shrugged. "Okay, mister. I'm with you. That Joey bastard, the cheap louse, I've had it with him."

"Joey?" I repeated, making a tremendous deduction—since she had been tossed out of *El Indio's* fleabag, Joey could be Jose Cuzo. "Your husband?" I asked, walking her to the nearest taxi.

"You for real, big boy? Naw, this is Jose the bull fighter. I was waiting tables up in Brownsville when he breezed through. I take off with him and now I get the brush—without even a return ticket to Texas. He's a cruel stud."

The inside of this old model car was hot and the driver gave me his best mossy smile, the strictly-for-tourists grin, asked, "Senor, where will I have the pleasure of taking you?"

"Where you going?" I asked the blonde.

"Wherever you're bedded down, big boy, if it's okay with you. I haven't a peso."

I gave the driver the address of my hotel as I decided since she knew *El Indio*, she was part of my work. "Been in Mexico City long, Miss . . .?" I asked.

"Janis. What do I call you, when I'm not mad?"

"Sam. Been here long?"

"Few weeks, off an' on." She touched her bright blonde hair, brushed it back from her thin shoulders. "Blonde hair is a big deal here—for a while. You a tourist, Sam?"

"In a way. I'm mixing business and sight-seeing. I . . . sell tools. Point is, I can use a guide for a few days. I don't mind blonde hair myself. I'll see to it you get a plane ticket back to the States. Okay?"

"Beats starving. Treat me right, Sam, and I'm not a bad type. I don't ask for much . . . but right now I'm hungry."

"Well stop at the first open restaurant . . ."

"Just be sure it caters to tourists. Drink the wrong water here and you'll end up skinny as me. I know a place." Janis rattled off fast Spanish to the driver.

We found a quiet place and I had some *real* Mexican food—ham and eggs, toast, and coffee. Janis gave me a rundown on her life without my asking: married young, busted up from hubby, waiting table in many towns as she drifted about . . . not an outright tramp only because she didn't have the looks.

I told the hotel clerk my wife had arrived and he didn't bat an eye. Janis immediately took a bath and came out of the bathroom minutes later, nude, asking, "Got a spare robe, or something, for me, Sam?" She wasn't quite as scrawny as I'd thought.

Janis said she hadn't slept in twenty-four hours, so at two-thirty I left her in bed and took off for the bull ring.

They say Mexico City has the world's largest ring, and I'll buy that. It sure was a hell of a big arena, jammed solid with about fifty thousand noisy people. Although I'd never seen a bull fight before, (and I was for the bull) even I knew the Indian was sensational. In his gold fancy tight suit he looked a lean one hundred fifty pounds, and moved like a tiger. After a few bows, he planted two *banderillas* (short spears) with colorful ribbons in the bull's hump, strutted around the ring—back to the bull—as if the Indian couldn't care less. Then he bowed to some official in a box, took his cape and a fake wooden sword, executed some really breath-taking passes . . . often sucking in his flat stomach to allow the bull's horn to miss him by a fraction of an inch. The crowd loved him, the contempt with which he treated the bull. Finally, a few minutes later, he called for a real sword, buried it to the hilt with one fast movement just behind the bull's head. He calmly walked away as the bull took a few awkward steps after him, then crashed to his knees.

I sat there, sweating in the sun and the heat of so many people as they chanted, "*Indio! Indio!*" almost like a prayer, over and over. As the bull was dragged from the

arena I got up and managed to push my way outside. I figured in this heat they wouldn't keep the dead animal many hours.

A group of ragged people and kids were gathered in a field behind the parking lot; human flies around the dead bull. They yelled as Jose approached about a half-hour later, a butcher's coat over his sharp linen suit. He was surrounded by a bunch of young men dressed in cheap, flashy clothes: hangers-on look the same the world over. One of them handed Jose a large knife and with expert skill the Indian quickly skinned part of the bull, sliced away big bloody chunks of the shoulder muscles, and finally the heart. Holding up the bloody piece of meat he made a short speech, which probably meant the bull's heart gave him strength in the ring.

The hungry crowd cheered as Jose gave the knife to another man who began butchering the bull, handing out chunks of meat. The Indian's share was put into a plastic bag by one of his followers. I wondered what Grace's dead husband had meant by *El Indio* being a vegetarian, what it had to do with anything. You don't kill because you like carrots better than steak. One thing was for sure—Jose was a great pitchman—had his own brand of bull.

One of his pals pointed toward me, whispered something to Jose. Not only was I a standout in the

crowd because of my own beef—I was also the only non-Mexican. Wiping his bloody hands on his spotted butcher's coat, Cuzo walked over to me. In fair English he asked, "Senor, you are interested in sport?"

"Yeah. This was my first bull fight. You're very good."

"I talk of blonde sport."

I gave him my best blank look—and I can look real dumb.

He suddenly laughed, showing very strong white teeth in contrast to the coffee-tan of his skin. "Well, it is said one man's garbage can be another's feast. So you like watch bull fight?"

"Yeah."

"You tourist? That why you are in Mexico?"

I nodded. "I seek the answer to the moment of truth," I corn-balled.

His smile fled, the color of his face turned dull—except for the brightness of his hard eyes. Walking away abruptly he called back, "Amigo, there is only one true answer to the moment of truth . . . death!"

It sounded like a hell of a profound statement.

CHAPTER II

Investigations, the movies to the contrary, can be very boring. For example, when you're staked out in the cold or rain all night, watching a house.

But it also has its moment, too,

as for example, I was laying in bed watching Janis try on a new dress I'd bought her. I was damn lucky in stumbling across a Janis. It wasn't necessary to pump her for information—a few drinks and I couldn't stop her from talking. Like now, she said—turning in front of the full-length mirror on our room door so the light skirt swirled up and showed her slim thighs, "Sam, you have one trait I admire in a guy; you're not cheap. Take Joey Cuzo, he doesn't let a single peso slip past his fingers. Man, he rakes in that loot. Some Sundays his take is ten thousand dollars—American green!"

"Maybe I should have taken up sticking bulls, myself. Does the Indian get to keep all that quiet money, or is he pieced off by a mob, like pugs in the States?"

"I don't really know. But he's so tight that . . . well, most of these matadors have a bunch of handlers, valets, yes-boys, around them. Joe has a few creeps, but he don't hire nobody to handle his equipment, does everything himself—to save a few lousy pesos."

"I hear he even takes part of the bull home for hamburgers," I added, casually.

Janis shook her blonde head with shrill laughter—and I knew she was a *real* blonde. "Naw, he don't eat it. That slob is a nut on eating, always making juices out of herbs and all that junk. That's only publicity about him eating the heart of

the bull—why the cheap stiff won't even let any of his buddies touch it. Always insists upon burning it up, himself."

"Why burn the meat?"

"Who knows? Indians are superstitious jokers. Joey likes a good time, believe me, but after every fight the first thing he does is burn the meat he's cut from the dead bull. Just sits there alone and stares at the burning meat. Don't like nobody to kid about it either—must be part of his religion. Tell you, Sam, when I first saw him I thought he was a big spender, and what the hell, waiting on tables is so much nothing, I didn't have anything to lose. But I'm glad to be rid of him, gave me the jitters. Just socks his dough away. Only allows himself a few luxuries: good clothes, a snappy English roadster, and a plane. He flies alone. But I was up with him once—he's a good pilot. We flew down to Matilla."

"Where's that?"

"A drag spot below Acapulco. Nothing there, but like really nothing—a tiny fishing village of huts. He landed on the beach, scared the devil out of me. Joe goes down there about once a week."

"What's he do there?"

"Listen, there ain't much you *can* do in Matilla. He told me to stay in the plane and in about ten minutes he was back and we took off. I know this, he had a fat wad of dough in a money belt but he didn't have it when we flew back."

"Tell me, with this religious kick that Indian is on, does he ever play with snakes? I once read that in the old, old days the Mexicans used to worship snakes."

"I never saw him play with any snakes, and if he did, I wouldn't be around," Janis said, taking off the dress. "Me and snakes don't mix, except the two-legged kind; I always run into them—present company not counted." She stretched, showing a profile view of her naked thin body. "They say not to drink the water in Mexico, and I'm thirsty. Sam, how about calling room service for a bottle of rye?"

"Early in the day for that, isn't it?"

"Come on, who drinks by the clock?" Janis asked, jumping into bed. "Or does anything else by the clock?" She snuggled up to me with what was meant to be a coy look.

"It's also too hot," I said, getting up. The high altitude had left me with a slight headache ever since Sunday. "I'll get you a drink." I phoned down for a pint, then asked Janis, "Did Cuzo ever have other girls around? A thin, sandy-haired one called Grace? Looks young but isn't?"

Janis flashed a fast, suspicious look my way. "Sam, what's with you? You look like a dick, I know you're packing a rod, and all you talk about is Joe. Are you a badge?"

"Honey, I'm a bull fight fan and Cuzo is one of the greatest," I said,

cautiously. "As for the gun, I always go armed. The tools I sell are used in oil wells, worth a nice piece of change."

"This Grace, she your chick?"

"Maybe. I heard she was fooling around with some matador. You ever hear Joe mention a Grace?"

Janis, for no reason, suddenly kicked up her feet, as if riding an imaginary bicycle on the ceiling. "Hard to say. Joey is a woman's man, always has a lot of hustlers around him. Kicked me out for some local pig—guess he got tired of my bones—this one is a fat bimbo."

Mexico City is really sophisticated. A bellhop came in with the pint and some ice, never blinked an eye at the sight of a nude woman kicking up her feet on the bed.

I left Janis nursing the bottle, told her I had to see a man about selling him tools, would be back in a few hours. Downstairs I phoned Grace. She was out and I tried the university. It took a while to get her and I found chewing a whole pack of gum at once helped my headache.

She asked, "Have you come up on anything, Sam?"

"I found the Indian really doesn't eat meat, as your husband learned. Look, can you go through your husband's files and find out where Cuzo was born, if he has any relatives around? I'd check the newspaper offices myself, but I can't read Spanish."

"Juan kept a very detailed file on the Indian. I'll be free after my next lecture. Shall I meet you downtown?"

"Okay. I'm phoning from a real bit of old Mexico—the Hollywood Cafe. Can you meet me here?"

"Be there at three-fifteen p.m. Sam, you much of a drinking man?"

"No. Don't worry, I never put my lushing on your expense pad."

"*Touche*. See you this afternoon, then."

I had lunch—without finding any true Mexican chow, and went back to the hotel for Janis. She was still in bed, an empty quart bottle on the floor beside the dead pint. I let her sleep—there wasn't much else I could do—decided to buy her a plane ticket back to the States tomorrow. Janis wasn't a bad sort, but she'd already taken too many turns down the wrong road.

Going outside, I walked about like an idiot in the hot sun, killing time. I mailed a few cards to friends in the States, sent a silver bracelet to my ex-wife, for no reason. By three I was back in the Hollywood Cafe, sipping *Tehuacan*; a bottled mineral water. Grace Lupe-Varon came in looking very cool in a blue silk suit which neatly set off her cropped sandy hair. Ordering a beer, she pulled a fancy tooled leather notebook from her purse, told me, "From Juan's notes, nobody knows where the Indian was born, or if he has any relatives. You

must remember, Sam, Mexico is still a semi-illiterate country, and in the villages few birth records are kept. The files show that for a short time Cuzo was a diving boy in Acapulco, and before that worked for a Spanish family named Zayas, who lived outside a tiny village called Matilla. Why are you so interested in any relatives?"

"In this business you never know from what angle a break may come, so I try to get a complete background on a subject. I think I'll go down to Acapulco tomorrow. Cuzo isn't fighting until next Sunday—I'll be back long before then, so . . ."

"Let me fly you down," Grace said. "Don't look so surprised, or is that fear on your big face, Sam? Don't worry, I have over a thousand hours in the air."

"Thanks, but . . . I'm not going alone."

Grace arched her thin eyebrows. "Sam, you must be younger than you look."

"Strictly business, I lucked up on one of *El Indio's* ex-gals, and I don't think you two should be seen together."

Grace giggled. "Mexico City in one aspect is like a small town; everybody knows everybody else's business. Sam, see those two sharpies sitting at the bar?"

I knocked my cigarettes off the table, glanced at two guys in linen suits working on beers, as I picked up the butts. "What about them?"

"Part of Cuzo's entourage. One with the fancy mustache handles his publicity. Certainly the Indian knows by now you're working for me. Let me fly you down. I haven't any classes until Thursday and I'd like a day or two of swimming myself."

I shrugged. "Sure. What time tomorrow . . .?"

"If I drive by your hotel within an hour, can you be ready? Waiting in the lobby with your baggage?" Grace gave me a sarcastic smile.

"Yeah. I'll get started now," I said, calling for the check. It would take an hour to sober Janis up, and I wanted her along—as a handy guide.

Janis was amazing: if she took on a quick load, she seemed to straighten out even faster—a cold shower and she was her usual talking-all-over-her-mouth self. When I mentioned I was buying her a plane ticket back to the States, she took it in her stride. And when I said we were going to Acapulco first, that night, she merely started getting her toilet things together. There's a great deal to be said for a babe like Janis—agreeable to anything a guy wants.

She wore her new dress and Grace was toggled out in mannish dungarees and a sweatshirt, so they made an odd pair. And were so damn cordial to each other I had to keep from laughing—you'd think they were jealous over me.

Grace parked her car at the air-

port and walked us to a twin-engineered Beechcraft. As we stepped into the cockpit, Janis pointed toward a sleek, red-tailed single motor plane warming up, whispered in my thick ear, "*That's El Indio's.*"

I stared at the plane but Jose wasn't anywhere around.

Grace really was an expert pilot and I relaxed and watched the barren countryside below. Within an hour, as twilight came sneaking in, we were over the neon lights of Acapulco, the waves breaking in slow rolls of phosphorescent flashes along the beaches, and inside the horseshoe-shaped harbor. Grace brought the plane in for a smooth landing—and flying down to Acapulco must have been a regular routine for her; without a word a mechanic took over the plane and a taxi was waiting to drive us the eight miles into town.

Grace had three rooms reserved in a pension on the beach, below the swank hotels high up on the cliffs. It was a large and comfortable house, up from Los Hornos Beach, and the help seemed to think a good deal of Grace. There was a bright boy of about eleven called Bernardo—the type of kid spoiled by too many tourists until he practically *has* to grow up to be a hustler—who took a fancy to me. Or it could have been the sales talk he gave every tourist. He kept remarking on my height and wanted to feel my muscles, said he would *really* show me the night life, until

Grace told him to beat it. After the heat of Mexico City I wanted to get a swim in, if possible, right away.

Janis wasn't for night swimming and seemed amused at having her own room. When I told Grace I was a good swimmer, she suggested some skin-diving before supper. From someplace in the pension she brought out a lot of equipment, including aqua-lungs, fins, and two heavy rubber suits. I got into mine as Bernardo sat on my bed and kept asking how much I weighed, how many inches I was over six feet, had I got my tin ear as the result of being a "box-ar"—and a lot of other foolish questions.

Feeling somewhat like a silly space man I joined Grace—the skin-tight rubber suit showing off more curves than I suspected she owned—and we walked across the sand to the Pacific. The beach was both empty and—to my surprise—dirty with trash and papers. I'd skin-dived a few times before but Grace was an expert at it. She seemed expert at so many things. We horsed around, not going down more than ten—fifteen feet, the water very dark and creepy at night. After about twenty minutes Grace motioned at the gauge on my tank, made with her fingers that it was time to surface. We were about a hundred yards off-shore and laying on our backs—so the Pacific would help support the weight of the tanks—we backstroked toward the

beach. The moonlight was out fairly strong by now. Passing the breakers we walked in. I was gazing up at the various lights in the hotels up on the cliffs when I suddenly felt a light tap in my gut. Looking down I saw a sliver of wood with a wad of cotton at one end of it sticking to my rubber suit.

"Grace, what kind of mosquitos they got here, sanitary ones?" I asked, pointing to the wood and cotton.

Grace's eyes went wide and she suddenly shoved me back—hard. I stumbled, fell in the water as she dived in beside me. I'd raised my glass face mask until it was on my forehead: now I sat up to take a small wave on my head and in my mouth. Only Grace's head was above the water as she studied the empty beach. "What's up?" I asked.

"Did it pierce your suit?"

"Did *what* pierce my suit?"

"The . . . the . . . thing with the cotton tip?"

"No, I don't feel anything," I said, running my hand through the water to my gut. There was nothing there. The waves had washed the silver away. "Why?"

Still staring at the dark sandy beach Grace told me, "It couldn't have broken the rubber suit, if it had cut your skin—you'd be dead by now. While I've never actually seen one before—outside of textbook illustrations—I'm pretty certain that was a dart from a blow gun—probably poisonous."

We were both crouched on the sandy bottom, only our heads above water. I felt both cold and a little confused. For one thing I wasn't sure the so-called "dart" hadn't been a hunk of the trash floating around, like you might put cotton on a stick to clean out your ears. Although I did have a distinct feeling of having been *hit* by it. Another thought was: assuming it had been a poison dart, I couldn't remember if I had been directly facing the beach or not—I'd been so busy watching the hotel lights on the cliffs. In short, if it was a dart I wasn't certain it had come *from* the beach; Grace—walking at my side and a little back of me, could have shot it. Wouldn't be hard to conceal a blow gun someplace in her suit. Not that I suspected Grace of anything, but all the angles about this case were so queer, the thought stayed in my mind.

I said, "Too bad we've brought everything except spear guns. Grace, we can't just sit out here all night." A couple of tiny crabs were inspecting my heel. "Let me dash ashore and see if . . . ?"

Grace was either a good actress or her eyes were really frightened. "No, Sam. A blow gun is effective at a hundred feet; you wouldn't have a chance. Should be another five minutes of air in our tanks—let's submerge and swim along the beach; whoever is waiting for us

will have no idea as to which direction we're heading. Or we can separate."

"We'll submerge but stay right *here*," I said, wanting to keep Grace in sight. "If there is a blow gun hood on the beach, he figures we'll swim away and will start looking for us—elsewhere."

Putting on our face masks and opening the tank valves, we sat on the sand in about five feet of water—like a couple of weird nuts. Then I took her arm and we crawled along the bottom toward the beach, finally surfaced—flat on our stomachs—at the water's edge. In the pale moonlight the beach still looked dirty—and empty. We stood up and I took her lung and we ran across the sand to the house.

Bernardo was waiting at the door, asked how we had enjoyed the swim, and could he use the lungs some day? I looked in on Janis: she was laying on her bed, reading an old magazine and listening to radio jazz. She told me, "If you're thinking of coming in here, take off those rubber pajamas, first."

"All I'm thinking is I want to eat, honey."

I went to my room and dressed. I decided the "dart" had merely been a piece of garbage which had floated against me. Our rooms were on the second floor. My one window faced some kind of a squat tree—a guy could climb that and take a shot at me. I went back into

Janis' room, which was in one corner of the house and had two windows . . . but no nearby trees. Giving her a friendly pat, I said, "Come on, get dressed."

"Be ready in a minute, my tummy has been yelling for food, too," she told me, jumping up. There was a whiskey halo around her words.

"Dammit, are you crocked?" I looked around for a bottle.

"Sam, stop it. I merely asked that little pest, Bernardo, if there was a drink loose and he brought me one tiny little belt."

"Okay, get dressed." Crossing the hall, I walked into Grace's room. She was buttoning a slinky, clinging dress.

"Sam, don't you ever knock on a door?" She didn't seem too angry.

"Sorry. Merely checking the windows. Tell me, is this blow gun deal popular in Mexico?" Her room was okay, the window facing the beach. A drainpipe ran down the wall, but it was not only a good six feet from the window, but didn't seem strong enough to support anybody.

"No. Usually find tribes in the Australian bush, Africa, South America, using blow guns."

"I think the so-called dart was merely a cotton swab drifting with the tide. Still, want to play it safe. Your room is safe. So is Janis'. I'll sleep with my shutter closed—there's a tree too damn near."

"Perhaps you'd better sleep with

Janis," Grace said, her voice mocking me.

"Might at that. Right now I'm starved—for food. Where do we eat around here?"

"I know a delightful restaurant you'll love."

"Great. Wait for you downstairs."

Bernardo was in the 'lobby' and I asked him, "Did the blonde—Janis—go down to the beach looking for us?"

"No, señor. She was in her room all the time. I brought . . ."

"Maybe she went out when you left the house?"

"But I did not leave, Señor Sam," the kid said, and I told myself to stop acting like a dumb dick.

Grace took us to a good restaurant—where they had better French food than you'll find in Paris. It was after ten p.m. when we left the place—walking like three stuffed turkeys. I liked what I could see of Acapulco. For one thing, my high altitude headache was gone. Acapulco was far more of a tourist joint than Mexico City, but its wide paved streets and luxury shops, hotels, were nothing to knock. At midnight we sipped a drink called *coco-loco*, they had added rum and bitters to a green coconut, and you drank it from the nut through a straw . . . as we watched men diving from the cliffs by torchlight. The drinks made me sleepy and we were back in our pension before the diving was over.

I'd forgotten about the blow dart

business, but still kept my window shuttered, which made the room too warm. As an afterthought I also dropped crumpled newspapers on the floor near the window and door, kept my .38 at my side under the sheet.

I was up at eight a.m. It was a hell of a fine clear day, with a good breeze coming in from the Pacific. I took a stroll, admiring the swank yachts and cruisers in the harbor, the lighthouse on Roqueta Island. The public beaches were already filling up with bathers, and a few eager-beavers were water skiing behind noisy outboard runabouts.

I returned to the house by ten a.m. I wanted to rent a car, drive down to Matilla—with Janis as my translator. Grace was breakfasting on the veranda. I joined her for orange juice, coffee, and some plain old USA pancakes. She said she was going to the airport, check on her plane. I went up to awaken Janis. She was out cold and I had no trouble finding the empty bottle—it was in bed with her.

Downstairs, I asked Bernardo if he'd brought Janis a bottle and he said brightly, "Yes, Señor Sam. Last night she ask for . . ."

"Okay, forget it."

"You wish to hire glass bottom boat at Caleta Beach? I show you some fine fishing?"

"Bernardo, how would you like to drive down to Matilla with me?"

His dark face became practically

one great smile. "Senor, I like that too much! My great godmother lives there."

"Fine. Without telling the ladies about it, or anybody else, let's get started. Do you know where I can rent a car?"

Of course the little hustler knew exactly where anything could be had and within a half-hour I was driving a new Chevy toward Matilla, which turned out to be a good one hundred ten miles south, along the coast. I explained to the kid I was a writer and doing a piece on the great *El Indio*, who I understood was born near Matilla.

"I never hear that, senor. Matilla would brag if the world's greatest matador had been born there. True, I have only been to the village once before, myself. It is not much, a few huts and sheds. Fishing is a hard business, senor, what you call a rough buck."

The roads were pretty good and mostly deserted. Once or twice planes passed overhead and on the Pacific we saw fishing boats, now and then an expensive cabin cruiser. I was able to do sixty most of the way. Within two hours we were in Matilla. Bernardo hadn't been lying—it wasn't even a wide spot in the road; merely a few miserable huts facing a wonderful beach. Nets were drying all about and when the wind died there was the sharp stink of dead fish.

Bernardo's great godmother was a leather-faced old woman who

seemed to be at least a hundred years old. Her face was as wrinkled as an old prune—the people in this region seemed to have darker skins than in Mexico City.

The old lady's shack was clean but pitifully bare. I got off to a good start by giving her a cigarette and she insisted I eat some fruit. I tried papaya, a pinkish fruit with black pits, delicious with salt and a dash of lemon. Then there was something called *chico-zapote*, which is big as a peach and tasted like an over-ripe pear—some of them were black colored and some were white. Bernardo told me to be careful, but this was what I'd been looking for—real native food.

The kid sat there, looking at me with troubled eyes, as he translated, and the old lady—puffing on another of my cigarettes—turned out to be a jackpot of information.

"Yes," Bernardo translated for her, "*El Indio* was raised here. Not many people remember this, but I am the oldest in Matilla, and I recall when he and his brother came here—as very small children. They came with a rich *patrone* called Zayas. It was said the boys were his slaves."

"Slaves?" I repeated, sure the kid hadn't heard right.

"Ay, slaves. The great matador is indeed a true Indian, of pure blood, but as one can see from his yellowish skin, he is from a land far to the south, on a mighty river called Amazon. The matador is said to be

a Campa Indian, of which I am told, there are many tribes on this river. It is a very hard country and slavery is still practiced. The Zayas had a rubber plantation, made many pesos. They came here because he was dying and they built a great house in the hills behind Matilla. The wife was a kind woman with soft hair the color of a fine pearl. A beautiful woman, who gave the two young brothers their freedom, treated them almost like sons. But when they were still mere children, the Senor Zayas, whom we rarely saw, died, and later the good woman with the beautiful hair left. For Spain, it was said. For a time the boys ran wild, then they disappeared from Matilla. Now *El Indio* returns here often in his marvelous flying machine—for a few minutes. Shortly after the other flying wonder lands, *El Indio* does not speak to many, although he did give to the church fiesta for our Saint . . ."

I cut in to tell Bernardo, "Ask her about this other 'flying wonder;' if she means another plane, and if it has two engines?"

"Ay, she says it has two motors."

"And does a woman pilot it?"

When the kid translated, the old lady shook her pale white-haired brown head. "No, no, she says the brother of *El Indio* drives it. Few people even know of this other plane, for it lands far down the beach, when most of the villagers are out in their boats."

"The brothers, are they twins, do they look alike?" I asked.

"No. The brother is far heavier than *El Indio*, and older."

"When the brothers meet, what do they do?" I asked. "Do they exchange packages, or anything like that?"

The old crone shrugged her bony shoulders. "That I can not tell you, they never come to our village. Whatever happens, it does not take long. First the older brother's great plane lands and then *El Indio* comes down in his bird. Very soon he leaves, and then the bigger bird takes to the air. Ay, it is indeed a miracle, to fly . . ."

"This happens every week?" I cut in.

Bernardo translated, talking to the old lady for a long time, while she rattled off something, counted on her fingers, and pointed out the open door toward the bright sun. Finally the kid told me, "She is not sure of the time, but it is very often now. In the summer, they do not come at all."

In the summer there aren't any bull fights in Mexico, either. There wasn't anything more the old babe could tell me. I offered her the rest of my cigarettes and she gave me a drink of some sort of sweet fruit. The kid and I started back to Acapulco.

The kid was full of advice: I shouldn't have taken a drink or eaten the fruit. Why was it the USA belly was so weak toward Mexican

water? Did I know that chewing gum came from *chico-zapote*? How did I feel? If I did get 'el tourism' Bernardo knew a smart doctor who would fix me up.

I wasn't listening to his chatter. While I still couldn't make which end was up in this, two planes meant big money. True, the Indian was raking in the pesos, but why the plane deal? And in this isolated village? Sounded like a smuggling operation, but the only dough in smuggling these days is in dope, and with the purses Cuzo was knocking down, why bother with that kind of a mess?

I was back in Acapulco by mid-afternoon. Bernardo wasn't fooling about my eating—no sooner had I reached the doorway of our pension when I had to dash for the can. The john was on the main floor and when I staggered out of that, Bernardo steered me to a doc down the street who gave me a couple of horse pills, told me the white *chico-zapotes* I'd eaten were also used as a laxative. He advised me to eat boiled rice for the rest of the day, sleep a lot, and asked for twenty bucks.

Walking back toward our house we came upon a crowd around one of the bars. Looking over their heads I saw Cuzo and some of his buddies sitting at a sidewalk table. Bernardo said, "There is *El Indio*, himself! He will be pleased to know you are doing a story about him and . . ."

I told the kid to shut up, explained Cuzo might want a lot of money for talking to me. This was logical in his sharp mind, and we walked on. Although he hadn't looked at me, I had a feeling Jose knew damn well I was in Acapulco.

Reaching our 'hotel,' I asked the lady sitting behind what passed for a desk where the girls were. She told me Grace had flown back to Mexico City at noon; something had come up at the university. As for Janis, she was "sleeping." From the bitchy grin on the woman's face I knew she meant Janis was still bagged.

As in a bad movie, I was explaining Janis always slept late . . . when I heard her scream. I ran up the stairs to see her come staggering out of my room. Her naked body was a terrible pale chalk-white. Her mouth was wide open, as if she couldn't get in enough air, her eyes were large and glassy, and she held both hands to her throat. Janis fell across the doorway. I saw a heavyset woman climbing out the window of my room. I dropped her with a lucky shot—and she toppled out the window.

I knelt beside Janis. She was stiff, her eyes like two marbles. It wasn't necessary but I felt of her heart—I knew she was dead. I ran across the room. The 'woman' was crumpled on the hard ground below, but now I saw 'she' was a heavyset

man with his hair cut in bangs across his wide forehead. He had a flat nose, high cheekbones, and a wide face. He was wearing torn pants and a worn shirt—which was now bloody. His arms were heavily muscled and the bare feet almost as wide as they were long, with tremendous toes.

Acapulco is a playground for the international rich and wherever you have wealthy cats you'll find an efficient police force. I dashed downstairs to call the police, but made a fast stop at the john first, and came out to find a sharply dressed police lieutenant and several cops. The officer was the handsome Latin type, complete to the oiled, brushed dark hair, hairline mustache, and sharp features. His name was Lt. Jorge Leon Tortela, and he was a very smooth joker who spoke perfect English.

Before I could say a word, he stepped in fast, grabbed my gun from its holster. I said, "While you're at it, look in my wallet. I have a permit to carry a gun—a Mexican one."

He looked at my wallet, then handed it back to me, said he'd keep the gun for the time being. "The blonde upstairs—she was poisoned. Come, I show you something very interesting on the man you shot dead."

Lt. Tortela took me outside to the spot under my window. Two cops in bright uniforms were standing near the dead man. They had

turned him over so he was flat on his back, the unseeing eyes staring boldly at the sun, the bullet such a small dark hole in his big body. Next to the corpse was a crumpled tube of bamboo and the crushed remains of a dull-grey, dead-looking thin snake.

Staring at the evil broken head of the snake, my insides began boiling with rage. "This what did Janis in?" I asked.

"I doubt it. There are no breaks on her skin. It is my guess she was sleeping with her mouth open and some kind of powerful poison was dropped between her lips. Her tongue is badly burned and swollen. Now, let us go to my office and put some facts down, Senior Eggers."

"Yeah. An innocent kid like Janis is messed up in this . . ."

Lt. Tortela cut me off with a sly, "I very much doubt if she was the innocent kind, Senior."

"There are all kinds of innocence!" I snapped.

We got into an old jeep and drove a short distance to a very modern building. In a cool, spic and span office, I went through my routine of being a writer—I was damn sure Bernardo had told him about my driving to Matilla. I said obviously Janis had been sleeping in my room, perhaps had been mistaken for me by the killer.

Lt. Tortela listened patiently, playing with an ivory letter-opener in the shape of a long pointed fin-

ger with a very red nail. I didn't mention Grace, the blow gun business of last night. When I finished the officer stroked his thin mustache—he was a guy who spent a lot of time at a mirror—then asked, "Why would this Janis be waiting for you in your bed, Senor?"

"Because she was a very thoughtful woman, very friendly—a true doll, in her own way."

"Could she have been over-friendly? Isn't it a fact you picked her up in Mexico City the other day?"

"So what?" I asked, trying to keep my temper. "In my book Janis was a babe who tried her best. She had nothing to do with any of this."

"Ah, and what exactly is 'this'?"

"I don't know."

"For what magazine or newspaper do you work, Senor?"

"I free-lance."

He nodded his handsome head, as though I'd established a point. "You know you hardly look like an author—more like a private eye."

"Bane of my life, I'm always being kidded about it."

"You came to Acapulco with Mrs. Juan Lupe-Varon?"

"Yeah. Met her in Mexico City. She gave us a lift in her plane."

Lt. Tortela fooled with his mustache some more. "It is very common knowledge how her husband died—also by a snake. It would seem more plausible if you were a private detective hired by Mrs.

Lupe-Varon. That would also explain your making queries about *El Indio*, having one of his ex-girls in your bed. But you insist you are a writer, and life is rarely plausible—if it was, there would be little need for police officers. Beside, we have checked on Mrs. Lupe-Varon, she landed in Mexico City well over two hours ago. Although the dead man was probably a hired killer."

"Yeah," I said, more to myself, glad they had checked on Grace. That narrowed it down nicely—to only the Indian.

"In time we shall of course learn the identity of the dead man with the snake, where he . . ."

"Try South America."

He jabbed the delicate ivory finger toward me. "Why South America? You have said you never saw the dead man before."

"I haven't but remember the bang-haircut. I once read Amazon Indians go in for a hair style like that. Where the word Amazon came from—the first Spaniards—due to the haircuts—thought the men were big women. Matter of fact, I thought I was shooting at a woman myself."

"Isn't it odd for a 'writer' to be carrying a gun, Senor?"

"I often stick my nose into dangerous places. By the by, while you're checking, ask Jose Curzo if he knew the dead man."

"You think there is a connection between a great matador and a little

blonde . . . ?"

"You want my off-hand opinion—yes!" I snapped.

Lt. Tortela gave me his best slick smile. "I am glad it is but a . . . how you say? . . . top of the head opinion. I am a career man, Senor Eggers, and to press such an inquiry would not do my career any good . . . unless I had positive proof."

I stood up. "If I had proof I wouldn't keep it a secret!"

"Sit down! I will tell you when and if you may go."

"I have to go right now. Where's the bathroom?"

"Ah yes, yes, so the boy told me. That will pass within a day. Two doors down, to your right, you will find the room. Then you may return to your pension, but do not leave Acapulco . . ."

I was already on my way, running.

Leaving the police station I felt angry, feverish, and weak. But I also had this hunch it was now only a very short matter of time before I stumbled on the answer—all the cards were on the table. Grace's husband must have had the same hunch when . . .

A small crowd was blocking the sidewalk in front of a cafe. Dressed in a custom tailored tropical suit, the Indian was sipping iced coffee, acknowledging the admiration of the crowd like a king. Feeling dizzy with anger and fever, I pushed my way through the little mob. He

glanced up at me, his face tense as a fighter awaiting the bell. He said softly, calmly, "So, the big Yankee Senor who seeks the moment of truth—the final answer."

"Janis found your answer!"

He shrugged his compact shoulders. "This I have just heard. A stupid little slut who . . ."

I went for him. He jumped back like a cat. The left hook missed but my right knocked him over the next table. Then it seemed an angry army fell on me. I kept punching and kicking as I went down . . . feeling fists, shoes, and even a knife.

The screams seemed to grow distant. I started to fly off into a hot, bloody, darkness, knowing I'd been stupid as hell to lose my temper . . . in front of this mob. Looking up I had a fast picture of the Indian, his face dark with hatred, pulling back his sharp pointed tan shoe to stomp my face. The shoe seemed to move in slow motion. Slowly—but surely—it came toward me, exploding in a flash of pain as it bashed my head and I sailed off into the feverish darkness.

CHAPTER IV

Several times I came to, fleet moments of awareness before drifting off into the welcome drugged night again. One time I recall Lt. Tortela's handsome face frowning down on me. He said, "Eggers, it is

a miracle we took you from the mob alive. Hardly sporting to punch a smaller man . . . and when he was sitting, too. What if you had broken one of the mator's famous hands? But you have some luck, *El Indio* presses no charges. And at least for the two days you have been in here, we have returned your stomach to normal. You are also indeed fortunate the knife wounds were not in vital spots."

Another time I drifted into the hospital room to see Grace at my bedside. She was reading a book and looked like a school girl. I floated away without talking to her.

Then I had this nightmare where a huge snake with a head larger than mine—was ready to strike. The fangs, the horrible, sharp, curved teeth, the deadly all-white inside of his gaping mouth . . . the hard, merciless eyes . . . came at me in slow motion. I even smelt the stink of death from the darting, red, forked tongue . . . and always awoke to smell my own wild sweat.

Then I opened my eyes and felt weak but okay, as if awakening from a good night's sleep. I moved my arms and legs—everything was working. I even sat up until a big cop with a copper face standing by the door, motioned for me to lay down again. Grace came rushing into my room, followed by Lt. Tortela in his fashion-plate uniform. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Hungry. Why the guard? Am I under arrest?"

Tortela gave me his flashing smile. "No, no. I merely am cautious, don't want any more Indians with snakes visiting you."

"You and me both. Have you learned where bang-head came from, who he is?"

"I regret to say, no, Senor Eggers. He is not a Mexican, so tracing him has become a difficult job. Mrs. Lupe-Varon, this charming lady, shares your obsession that *El Indio* is behind all this. She has such intellect and charm, I would almost act if I was offered any real proof. Good hard proof, you understand."

Listening made me tired. I felt of my face and arms; stitches had been taken here and there. But mainly I was hungry. I ate a small meal, argued in vain for more chow, and dropped back to sleep. When I awoke it was dark out. I sat up and Grace, who was sitting beside my bed, gave me a cigarette. "Thanks," I told her, puffing on it, although I didn't feel like smoking. "When can I leave here?"

"Anytime. Are you certain you're up to leaving?"

"I feel okay. I'll take it easy. *Slow-motion*, Grace, that's our key to the works. You think the room is bugged? Can we talk?"

She nodded her head of cropped hair. "I doubt if the electronic age has hit Mexico. We can talk. I'm sorry I brought you into this mess.

It's hopeless. The police will never do anything to an idol . . ."

"All part of my job. And this pasting I deserved: I blew my top. Grace, we don't need the police; I have this worked out. Your husband was on the track with the vegetarian bit, and now this slow-motion kick I'm on . . . I'm going to trim *El Indio's* sails."

"Sam, what's with this slow-motion?"

"Should be right up your alley. Tell me, haven't I read that in the jungles of the Amazon they have all kinds of unknown medicines, witchdoctor stuff, to straighten out crooked limbs, shrink heads? Is that on the level?"

"It is assumed to be, although never scientifically proven—mainly because such rites are kept secret. Why?"

"Because Jose is a Campa Indian from the Amazon, and has a brother living down there who flies into Mexico once a week to give *El Indio* something, and takes out a lot of dough. I figure they have a big ranch going there, are using the dough to build it up. I don't know and it isn't important, except about the brother coming in weekly during the bull fight season," I said, and went on to tell her all I'd found out with Bernardo.

When I stopped Grace said, "How fantastic, a *slave* in this day and age! But I have heard slave labor is used in the remote parts of the Amazon, on the Peru side."

"Grace, remember that dart from the blow gun: suppose it had pierced my skin, exactly what would have happened to me?"

"I can't say exactly, but the Jivaro, one of the Indian tribes along the Amazon, use what is called *ampi*, or *curare* on their darts. This is a mixture of certain herb juices and roots which brings on paralysis of the muscles—including the heart muscles—and death."

"You mean slow-motion dying! Does this junk have to be freshly made?"

"I imagine so. Sam, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying there's a hungry, wild, Indian kid in a strange land who tries to be a matador, without much success. Then he, or his brother, recall something from their childhood days—this *curare* stuff. A bull is a big strong animal, so it takes minutes for the stuff to finally kill him, which is fine, because during those minutes the bull's reflexes will be working in slow-motion. Handling his own *banderillas*, the Indian becomes a daring sensation. Know why? Because the first and only time he sticks the bull, this *curare* juice is on the point of the *banderilla*! From then on in, the bull is dopey, so Jose puts on a show, supposedly taking all kinds of chances—but actually playing with a dying animal. One day a fifth-rate bull fighter, and overnight—a sensation!"

"Lord, Sam, that can be the an-

swer," Grace said, staring at me as if I was made of jewels.

"It *is* the answer. His brother flies in a fresh batch of the poison every week. And this smart pitch about butchering the bull, eating the muscles and heart to give him strength—strictly Cuzo's clever shoe polish! He simply couldn't risk anybody eating the poisoned parts, becoming sick—dying—and exposing him for the fraud he is! When your husband hit upon Jose being a vegetarian, the Indian had to have him killed or see his racket fall apart. Hell, that's why Jose never works in Spanish rings—too far from his fresh supply of poison."

Grace's eyes almost became bigger than her face. "Sam! Sam! Let me call in Lt. . . !"

I shook my head, tried to hold in my strength. "No. Be a waste of time. We have a nice theory going, but not a drop of *proof*. This *curare* stuff is probably only a couple drops, meaning it will be rough to find. But supposing the police did stop the brother's plane, or even collared Jose in the act of picking up the junk—what would it prove? Or they find it on his *banderillas*? So what? *El Indio* would be ruined as a matador, but don't you see, Grace, doping bulls isn't breaking any law—or would be only a minor rap. Still be no proof he killed your husband, or Janis. What are we going to do then, try to find witnesses deep in the Amazon jungle? End

up dead, ourselves? You heard Lt. Tortela, who is a smart apple—a cop would have to be tired of his job to even *hint* the great Jose Cuzo was faking his fights. What's more, if we go to the police, the Indian will get wind of it, retire and leave Mexico, and that will be the end of things."

"You mean we do nothing, Sam? Justice should . . ."

"Honey, justice is like the cat, plenty of ways of skinning it. You want Jose for killing your husband. I want him for ruthlessly killing dumb but nice Janis. Grace, if you're willing—we'll knock him over, but in our own way."

"First, take it easy. This has to be our big fat secret—if one word leaks, we're dead. What day is this?"

"Thursday."

"Fine. Cuzo will be fighting in Mexico City this Sunday," I said, almost whispering—I was that tired. "You go home and read up on this *curare* junk. Tomorrow I should be able to walk out of here. We'll fly back to Mexico City and this Sunday . . . I think justice will finally catch up with *El Indio*!"

CHAPTER V

Grace and I were at ringside as the crowd gave Jose the usual hysterical ovation after he placed his *banderillas*. He crossed the ring with his cocky walk, asked permission to kill the bull, and then

started the final passes with the cape and wooden sword. I admired the way he had things timed—it took about four minutes for the poison to kill a bull—which fitted in perfectly with the five-minute time limit the matador is given in which to make the kill—once he asks permission.

Working close to the animal, Jose started his arrogant pass with the cape—pulling in his gut to let the horn go by. The horn ripped his fancy silver suit and the crowd gasped. Still acting as if he couldn't care less about the bull, Jose waved the cape for the second pass. The bull came rushing in, suddenly hooked his head to the left and gored Jose, both horns getting him in the stomach!

The bull tossed *El Indio* again and again, playing with him as if he was a limp, bloody, rag doll—before the other matadors could distract the animal. It took time because the beast hadn't been tired, or piced—was literally as strong as a bull.

We pushed and fought our way to the emergency hospital under the stands. Grace didn't want to go, but I insisted. She knew enough people to get us in. Jose was on the operating table, naked and bloody, his skin a pale yellow, tubes running in and out of the terrible gashes in his belly and groin.

Everybody knew he was dying—a priest was giving him the last rites. I towered over the others and perhaps it was only my imagination—but I was certain Jose's glazed eyes suddenly got me in focus. His dry lips moved . . . I felt he was telling me: *this is the real moment of truth!*

He died with a tight, painful smile on his lean face . . . still staring at me. I think he damn well knew I—we'd—got him. Perhaps he'd heard about the slugged guard.

Grace found out *curare* is a thick syrup, dark brown like melted chocolate. It was that simple—after I knocked the guard cold, we'd entered his dressing room—found the real *curare* in a tiny plastic bottle hidden in a small statue of a saint . . . We had merely substituted plain chocolate for the poison.

When the bull first ripped his suit in the arena, *El Indio* must have realized something was wrong . . . his stuff wasn't paralyzing the beast . . . putting him in slow-motion.


Yet, seeing Jose's hard face—harder now in death—I no longer hated him. In a vague way I was even glad it had worked out this way . . . the fans would never know the truth . . . *El Indio*, the ex-slave, died a national hero . . . instead of a national punk.



THE DEADLY AFFAIR

She watched Tony pace the floor as she combed her hair. She knew she'd miss him . . . but she couldn't afford blackmail.

BY
CHARLES
CARPENTIER



MILDRED lay on the bed with the sheet pulled over her white nakedness, smoking a cigarette and watching Tony. He was pacing back and forth, a towel wrapped around his waist.

"The couple of hundred you gave me last month," he said. "That was just for living on 'till I could get something going. Now I gotta have dough just to stay alive."

She'd married Martin for his money. But she'd gotten to like him. He gave her the security she'd been looking for all her life. He wasn't exciting like Tony—and

some of the others. But if he found out about her coming here to Tony's apartment, he'd kill her. If he found out she was giving Tony money in addition to love, he'd kill her twice. If he could figure out a way to work it.

"I thought Goldie was running his own show," Tony was saying. "That's where I made my mistake. You've heard of Goldie?"

Mildred nodded. "I've heard of him, but I don't know anything about him."

"He organizes a heist now and then. Rest of the time he's running numbers and girls. Pushes snow once in a while, things like that. Nothing big. But steady." Tony came around the bed to the night stand and lit a cigarette. "Anyway, I thought he was Number One, so I hit him up to go to work for him and he says he'll have to check with the Old Man."

"Who's the Old Man?" Mildred asked, wishing Tony would get back in bed.

"That's a question you don't get an answer to. Nobody does. So anyway, Goldie comes back real nice about it. He's sorry and all that. He comes back and says the Old Man got a run-down on me somewhere I don't know how or where—and found out about my breakout up in Ryan City."

"Breakout?"

"Me and a couple of other guys. We got picked up for a bank job—just a small one. And we staged a

breakout before the Feds got there to take us over. So anyway, the Old Man—whoever the bastard is—pulls a switch on me. Instead of a job in the organization, he sends Goldie back to tell me it's either I kick in or he'll have his boys turn me over to the Feds."

Mildred crushed her cigarette into the ashtray on the night stand. "How do you know it isn't Goldie?" she asked. "How do you know there's somebody else—the Old Man or whatever?"

"Aw, hell no," Tony said. "Goldie and me, we're old buddies. He wouldn't pull a thing like that. Besides, I've heard some of the other guys around talk about the Old Man. He's real, all right."

"Well," she said, shrugging her soft white shoulders under the cascade of her long black hair, "why don't you call his bluff?"

Tony stopped at the foot of the bed. "Baby. It isn't a bluff. He's got the goods and he knows it."

"Well," she shrugged again, "what would happen if he did turn you over? How long would . . .?"

"Baby," Tony interrupted, "you don't understand. You just don't understand. That little bank job is the only thing I was ever dumb enough to pull that I couldn't buy out of. And I staged the breakout because, baby, if they sent me up, I'd die. I just couldn't take it in the pen. I tell you I'd die." He started pacing again.

Mildred was wondering why

there always had to be trouble like this. It started out to be nothing more than a casual thrill, a way to spend a dull afternoon. But then she'd fallen for Tony. And now there was trouble. Trouble she couldn't do anything about. Even if she had the money to help him, she'd be afraid to because of Martin. She still had some covering to do on the money she'd already given him.

"How much do they want you to—kick in?" she asked.

Tony stopped with his back to her. "Ten G's," he said.

"Oh, my god!"

He turned on her suddenly. "That's right—ten thousand dollars. What'd you think it would be? A couple of hundred bucks? Peanuts to these guys."

She drew a breath: "Maybe with enough time . . ."

"Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow by midnight."

"You'll have to skip town. Get away until things settle down."

"You don't run from something like this, baby," Tony said. "It can't be done. You don't know these people. They'd nail you right now if they thought you were trying to skip out." He came back to the foot of the bed. "Don't get me wrong about this, baby. I love you and I love having you come here like this. Except for that little dough last month, I've never asked anything from you, have I? I never

even asked what your last name is or where you live or anything about you. Am I right?"

He waited until she nodded slowly.

"Okay," he said. "But I know you're married and I know you're married to a rich guy. I can tell by your clothes and that car you've got parked down the block. I've thought of everything, baby, and you're my only answer. I gotta have ten grand—tomorrow. That means either you get it from this guy you're married to—or . . ."

Mildred took another cigarette from the pack next to her purse on the night stand. "Or what?" she asked, lighting the cigarette and trying to keep her hands from shaking.

"Or I find him and tell him . . . about us. All about us."

Martin would kill her if he found out . . . he'd kill her.

Most of the time he was good to her. He never asked questions and he gave her everything she wanted. Or almost everything.

He had so many different business interests she didn't know which business he was talking about, but just last week he'd said that if everything went right he'd buy her a white Russian sable coat. That was one of the things she'd wanted most. It was a symbol of everything she dreamed of . . .

She looked up at Tony, leaning over the foot of the bed, waiting for an answer.

She put her cigarette out and took a steel rat-tail comb out of her purse. She began combing her soft, rumpled hair. "All right," she said. "I'll get the money from him—somehow."

Tony took a deep breath. "Good. Like I say, baby, I'm sorry to have to do it this way, but . . . you know how it is."

"There's just one thing."

"Anything, baby," Tony said. "Anything."

"Come back to bed and show me how much you love me."

Tony dropped the towel off and slipped into bed beside her. "Baby," he said, reaching for her, "you'll never know—you'll never know how much I love you."

After all, it was safe. Nobody knew her. Nobody except Tony ever knew she came here. And there was no way to trace her. She'd been real careful about that.

She still had the comb in her hand when she turned, rolling on top of him, pressing her open mouth against his.

His scream echoed in her own mouth and the teeth of the comb ripped the flesh of her palm as she drove the rat-tail end of it with all her strength into him. His body surged upward against hers . . . as if answering her love. His hands tore at her back, tangled in her hair, pulling wildly. She fought to hold her mouth against his, feeling his teeth digging at her lips and his legs thrashing under her.

After a long time, his whipping body slowly lapsed into stillness. She lifted herself off him, feeling the sticky pull of his blood that had already begun to dry between their hot, pressing bodies.

She turned her head away. She couldn't look at him. She pulled the rat-tail comb from between his ribs. The soft gurgling sound it made and the sigh of blood-bubbling air it released through his still-open mouth almost made her sick. Still looking away, she covered him with the bedsheet.

When she was able to think again, she began to put things in order. She washed off in the shower and wiped everything in the apartment that could possibly have her fingerprints on it. She remembered reading about that in detective stories; it was something you had to do if you ever decided to murder someone.

She slipped out of the apartment without once having looked back at Tony.

She was sure of it: she'd thought of everything. She'd taken her time and done everything right. It was perfectly safe. They'd never find out who killed Tony. And after a while they'd stop trying to find out.

And after a while, she'd get over being in love with him.

There was still Martin. There was still the white Russian sable coat. And in time there'd be other men. Everything was going to be all right.

"You don't look so good, honey," Martin said, cutting into the thick steak on his dinner plate. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Mildred said, toying with her fork. "I'll be all right."

"I hope so. 'Cause I might as well tell you, honey. Things haven't been going so good in business." Martin took a big bite of his steak.

"I had a deal going with a guy, but it fell through. It seems they found the guy dead. Somebody stabbed him. Knocked him off in his apartment today." He chewed his steak thoughtfully for a moment. "So honey, I'm sorry, but it don't look like I'll be able to get that coat for you. You can't do business with a dead guy, you know."



SIMIONE, the black cat with the graying whiskers and crooked tail was walking across the downstairs foyer of Mrs. Reinecke's apartment building the morning it all happened. Whether, in his leisure stroll, Simione was minding his own business or not is a matter for

ted briskly down the stairs. He had slept well, and now, filled with energy, he looked forward to a day of accomplishment.

The bifocals he had been wearing for the past two weeks had improved his working efficiency considerably. They were not, unfortu-

CHAIN REACTION

The ancient Egyptians believed that the spirits of the evil dead lived in some cats. Of course, there is nothing to that old superstition.

BY CHARLES BOECKMAN

considerable conjecture.

Raymond Widborne, bachelor, age thirty-five, occupation bookkeeper, was emerging from his apartment, number two-F, at the moment Simione began the fatal trip across the downstairs foyer. Mr. Widborne adjusted his glasses, settled his umbrella handle over his arm, patted his briefcase, then trot-

nately, designed to aid in the downward vision around one's feet. They, in fact, created something of a blind spot at that particular area until one became more adept at their use. Simione and Raymond Widborne set a collision course for the foot of the stairs. There was an explosion when they met. Simione ran away squalling and spitting in

indignation. Mr. Widborne went sprawling the length of the foyer, skidding on his nose.

He broke his new glasses and tore the knee of his suit. When he had pulled himself to his feet and reassembled himself, he glared about nearsightedly, trembling with rage. He was seeking revenge in the form of a broadside kick, but by then Simone had disappeared down the basement stairs.

He, therefore, did not find Simone. But he did locate Mrs. Reinecke, the landlady of the apartment house. She had just opened the door of her downstairs apartment, missing the accident by a few moments. She was on her way to the beauty parlor and in an exceptionally jovial mood.

"Good morning, Mr. Widborne," she smiled. "How are you this beautiful morning?"

Mr. Widborne glared at her. "What's good about it?" he demanded. "It isn't bad enough I have to put up with your leaky faucets, insufficient heat, sticking windows, and outrageous rent. Now you have that mangy cat of yours way-laying me at the foot of the stairs. It's a miracle I didn't break a leg!"

He clamped his hat on his head. "Good morning, Madam!" He turned to stalk out of the building, collided with the door jamb, scalded the air with rather shocking four letter words, then made his exit.

Mrs. Reinecke stood in her door-

way, open-mouthed. By the time she had recovered from surprise and reacted with a temper outburst which could match or better anything Mr. Widborne could loose any day of the week, he was out of range. Nothing is more frustrating to an angry woman than to be deprived of an audience. This is especially true of Mrs. Reinecke who had red hennaed hair, a biting tongue, and the disposition of a shark.

She slammed her apartment door, rattling windows all over the building and marched out of the building. "Well, now doesn't he just think *he's* Mr. Somebody. Leaky faucets, outrageous rent indeed! Hump! Oh, what a fine smart alecky that one is!"

She muttered her way for five blocks to the beauty parlor and planted herself in the chair, still talking to herself.

"Good Morning, Mrs. Reinecke," Madeline Jaseke, the beauty operator smiled cheerfully.

Mrs. Reinecke grunted at her.

Madeline was a thin, quiet woman in her middle thirties. She was the long suffering type who endured with resignation chronically aching feet and a taxi driver husband who abused her. Since the first rule of the Moderne Beaute Shop was a cheerful and pleasant approach to customers, Madeline put on a smiling mask every morning when she left for work. By the end of the day, after eight hours on her

aching feet, the smile became something of a grimace and her face muscles hurt. But she managed to uphold the public relations credo of the Moderne Beaute Shop; she remained pleasant to the customers to the bitter end.

Mrs. Reinecke, however, proved to be the bitter end. Still seething with indignation at her tenant, Mr. Widborne, she scolded Madeline for pulling her hair. Then she screamed that the rinse water was too hot. She made insulting references to Madeline's qualifications as a beauty operator, inferring that she would no doubt be more suitably employed as a char woman.

Through this tirade, Madeline kept her face muscles set in her smiling mask. She lifted one foot off the floor to ease the ache and said softly, "Yes, Mrs. Reinecke. I'm sorry, Mrs. Reinecke. You're absolutely right, Mrs. Reinecke."

Mr. Reemes, manager of the Moderne Beaute Shop, drawn by the wrangle in booth four, entered the scene. "Good morning, Mrs. Reinecke," he bowed. "Are we having any difficulties?"

"Difficulties? You want to know if we're having any difficulties?" Mrs. Reinecke sobbed. "Look at this." She held out a strand of wet, hennaed hair. "Just look at that!" she bawled. "You know, Mr. Reemes, that I've been comin' to this beauty parlor for the past twelve years. I'm one of your best customers. Why do I have to put up with

an operator that doesn't know what she's doing, and insults customers besides!"

"Oh, my goodness," Mr. Reemes gasped, appaled. "She insulted you, Mrs. Reinecke?"

"Sure, she insulted me," Mrs. Reinecke said billigerently. "What else you want to call it?"

Madeline was standing beside the chair with the helpless frozen smile on her face, putting her weight on the other foot to ease the pain.

"Madeline!" Mr. Reemes said to her in a shocked tone. "How could you be rude to a customer. You know our first rule—"

"I wasn't rude to her," Madeline said in her soft voice, through the fixed smile.

"Listen at that," Mrs. Reinecke yelled. "Now she's callin' me a liar!"

"Oh, for goodness sake," Mr. Reemes said. "Tsk, ts, ts. We can't have our operators insulting our customers."

This was particularly true in view of the fact that customers were harder to come by than operators.

"Madeline," he said sternly, "you're fired. Get your week's salary from the cashier and leave this shop at once. And don't call me up asking for a reference, you hear?"

"Yes, Mr. Reemes," Madeline smiled softly. "Thank you, Mr. Reemes. Goodbye, Mrs. Reinecke," she smiled. Being pleasant to customers had become such a habit she couldn't even break it at the end.

Mrs. Reinecke settled back in her chair with a satisfied grunt.

Madeline limped to the cashier, got her week's pay, put on her shabby coat and last year's hat, and limped home. It was six blocks, but her husband raised cane if she spent money for a taxi.

Every day at noon she limped home to prepare her husband's noon lunch. Sometimes she had to hurry back to a customer before she had time to eat herself. But her husband didn't like carrying sandwiches. Man couldn't get himself a hot lunch at noon, wasn't no point in being married, he had stated on numerous occasions.

Madeline eased her aching feet into bedroom slippers and put the noon meal on the stove.

At exactly twelve noon, her husband, Alfred Jaseke, parked his cab in front of the apartment building and came clomping up the stairs. He was still in a good mood. He had just carried a fare on a round-about trip across town and received a fifty cent tip.

He washed his hands, then sat at the table with a hungry grunt and tucked the napkin under his chin. Madeline placed the meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and tiny peas before him.

He grunted again with pleasure. Meat loaf was his favorite dish. Madeline wasn't much of a wife, but she could cook a heck of a good meat loaf. You had to give her that.

Madeline quietly took her place

across the table from him and placed a small helping of the meat loaf on her own plate. Under the table, she eased her throbbing feet out of her bedroom slippers and rubbed her left toes over her right arch.

"Meat loaf's got a little too much salt today," her husband mumbled through a mouthful of potatoes.

She smiled at him. "What did you say, Alfred?" she asked softly.

He washed down the food with a glass of water. "Said the meat loaf's got a little too much salt," he repeated.

"Oh," she said very quietly.

She got up from the table and padded into the kitchen in her bedroom slippers. She opened a drawer and took out a large meat cleaver. She returned to the dining room. Then she did something she'd been wanting to do for fifteen years. She swung the meat cleaver down on her husband's head, splitting it open like a pumpkin.

Then she sat down, still smiling, and massaged her throbbing arch and sighed.

That night on the roof of the apartment building, Simione, the black cat with the gray whiskers scratched himself, sighed, and gazed across the city with an odd and inscrutable expression in his oblique eyes. The ancient Egyptians believed that the spirits of the evil dead lived in some cats. Of course, there is nothing to that old superstition.

She sprawled beside him in the cockpit, letting herself lurch against him with the movement of the boat. A challenge as primitive as the sea came from the girl.

SEA WIDOW

BY WILLIAM P. BROTHERS

THE RATTLE of the alarm, shrill and discordant, shook him from sleep. It was still dark, the cold air billowed the white curtains from the window. He swung his legs out of bed, reaching for slippers and the device to quiet the alarm at the same time. From the next bed he heard his wife Miriam stir. He switched on the bedside lamp and with the light came the sinking sensation in his stomach.

This was the day.

As he struggled into his robe, his



wife turned in bed, her eyes still closed.

"What a time to get up," she said dreamily. "I'm glad I can't stand sailing."

I'm glad you can't either, he thought to himself.

He looked at her for a moment, the long lashes, the incredibly smooth skin of her cheek, the tousled, black curly hair against the white of the pillow. God, how much he loved her. It was like an ache deep in his chest.

It's for you I'm doing this, and he corrected himself quickly. No, don't blame her. At least you can be honest with yourself. You got yourself into it. All by your lonesome. And you'll have to get yourself out just the same way.

"Make some coffee?" she inquired.

"No, don't get up. Go back to sleep. I'll eat something at the pier."

"You're a darling," she said sleepily. "All the same, I'm going to make sure Wendy doesn't marry a part-time sailor."

He went into the bathroom, stripped off his pajama tops and started the barbaric ritual of shaving. The face that exposed itself slowly from the lather with each stroke of the razor was lean, bronzed by the sea wind and sun. The nose was straight, the jaw was firm, a face neither handsome nor homely. Gray was starting to show at the temples, but what could you expect when you pushed forty.

How would other people see that face, he asked himself in the mirror. Would they see it as the face of a murderer?

His hand trembled, he cut himself, cursed. Did he have the nerve? *He had to have the nerve.* He mopped the lather from his face with a towel, stared at the face once more, as if he were seeing it for the last time. It would be, he knew, a different face after today. That much was certain. He dropped the towel in the hamper and went back into the bedroom.

He pulled on drawers, a woolen turtle-neck sweater, old trousers, canvas sneakers. The rest of his gear was at the boat.

"Is something wrong? You're not looking well. Pale around the gills, sort of."

She had her eyes open and was looking at him.

"No, I'm all right," he said, and as if she might guess by looking at his face, he turned off the bedside lamp. In the dark he bent to kiss her.

Her arms twined up around his neck. For a moment he held her, feeling the soft weight of her half asleep body. Thirty five, she still had a good figure, although she worried about her weight. And without being able to help himself he contrasted it with the firm, solid flesh of a woman fourteen years her junior, which was just about what Lola was.

"Have a good time and be care-

ful," she murmured. "I don't want to be one of these goddamn sea widows throwing wreaths on the water."

He left her then, going quietly down the stairs in order not to wake Wendy and George, Jr. He went into the study off the living room, snapped on the light. He unlocked the drawer of his desk, took out a thick envelope. He opened it, counted the money quickly, put it back into the envelope.

In the living room he stopped, surveyed the wall to wall carpeting, the stone fireplace, the expensive furniture. Sixty thousand dollars worth of comfort, he thought. He'd worked long, hard hours to provide this. And he intended to protect it.

He slapped his palm with the envelope in a gesture of finality, put it in his pocket. He snapped off the study light and went out by the rear terrace to the garage.

He thought for a moment about taking the Caddy, changed his mind, got into the station wagon, backed it carefully out of the garage. This day would be like every other Saturday, except for the fact of murder.

How, how, how, he asked himself as he wheeled along the freeway, did I ever get myself involved in this?

The sequence of events was logical and orderly, he thought. Take two given people with known characteristics, and it is almost possible to predict the outcome. "With

known characteristics." That was the point.

George Matthews, age 39, Vice President of Bledsoe and Co., makers of marine equipment. Salary: \$30,000 per year, plus bonuses. Every penny of it earned. Attractive wife and two children, all three to whom he is deeply attached. Lives in suburban Brookdale in a manner befitting his income. Weekend sailor, owner of the *Porpoise*, loves the sea and sailing, which he does on every free weekend.

Lola Barnes, age 21, occupation none. Unmarried, with short blonde hair, a figure worthy of a calendar illustration and a mind as tough as a six inch hawser line. Knows boats, has been around them since she could toddle. Morals: none.

Two other principals, George Matthews thought, but they could in no way be considered culpable, except perhaps in a negative way. The *Porpoise*, thirty two feet, slightly too large for one person to sail alone conveniently. And Miriam Matthews, wife, who in her own nice way does not like boats or the sea, because of a continual seasickness.

The results: predictable.

He had changed the *Porpoise's* mooring from Scottfield to the Seaciff pier because it was half an hour closer. The second weekend Galbraith at the last moment had not been able to make it. He'd resigned himself to varnishing the

hatch covers and some railing.

"Can I come aboard?"

She was wearing dungarees and an old sweater. The minute she stepped aboard, he knew she understood boats. There was a careless agility in her step, and something else, too. A way of standing, her feet apart, an animal-like quality in the way her hips were thrust forward.

"Going to take her out?"

"My friend couldn't make it. A little too rough to handle out there alone."

"I'll crew, if you'd like."

He looked at her, saw the hard outlines of her body beneath the careless clothes, the young uplifted breasts, the full, taut thighs and something began to claw in his belly. "Why sure," he said. She smiled. Small, uneven teeth. The animal magnetism held him. Her body was to be touched, explored, possessed. He felt suspended in a state of tension and fright, as when a shoplifter feels the hand of the store detective.

The *Porpoise* sailed easily, sinking down into the long troughs of gray-green sea, then climbing a crest with the water breaking over the bow and dumping in white foam from the gunwales. The sails were taut and white against a blue sky. The sea, monstrous, heaving, was a challenge, primitive as the earth, worthy of any man. She sprawled beside him in the cockpit, letting herself lurch against him

with the movement of the boat. A challenge as primitive as the sea came from the girl.

His free hand went out and encompassed the girl. She came to him willingly, her lips tasting of the salt spray. "We'd better reef the sail and tie the wheel," he said after a moment. His mouth was dry, his voice husky.

She looked up at him and he was startled to see no expression in the blue eyes at all. It was as if he were looking into nothingness.

"All right," she said, pulling away from him. "Bring her into the wind."

There was no love, no sympathy, no tenderness, only an animal-like greed. He was not the first, he had no illusion about that. But as they lay there, the boat rocking and heaving, her legs wound tightly about his, he had the sensation of having stepped over a precipice. He was irrevocably committed, beyond his power to do anything about. It was later that he understood the lack of expression in her blue eyes.

For the next three months they sailed every weekend. As he came to know her better, he realized she had a dull, unimaginative mind. Most of her time, he gathered, was spent at Izzy's bar and restaurant, exchanging banalities with the fishermen and local yacht harbor beatniks. Someone would invariably come along and buy her a beer. And later they would wander laughing into the night.

One Saturday a stocky man of thirty accompanied her to the boat. He was short with the long, hairy arms of an ape, a low forehead and yellow teeth. He helped her aboard, making some obscure joke at which they both laughed. Before he turned to go he winked broadly at George and made a motion with his arm.

No prig, George was well aware of the seamier side of things, but he was filled with a disgust bordering on nausea. He asked her, "Are you sharing favors with that hairy ape?"

She looked at him with that queer, blank stare. "What of it?" she answered. "What do you care? You're gone to your fancy family all week. What am I supposed to do, sit around on my tail?"

How had she found out about him, he wondered. He had never discussed his other life with her. But in a moment he had forgotten the hairy ape, forgotten her useless defense, forgotten everything. The need for her was a vice, a depravity he sunk into willingly, glorying in the disgust that wrenched his senses. And at the end the need was as strong as it had been in the beginning.

And then the demands began.

He made good time down the freeway. Except for the lumbering bulk of a few big truck-trailer rigs, there was little traffic. The first light of early morning began to color the sky. Yes, he thought, then the demands began.

At first they were tentative, nominal. Fifty dollars to pay her rent, twenty for a sweater she had liked, a little here, a little there. The first big bite was two hundred for an obscure debt she could never quite explain. He had recognized the pattern at the time, was not really surprised, but found there was nothing he quite wanted to do about it.

Now she was greedy. Claiming she was pregnant. There was no way for him to know if she were telling the truth. And even if she were, the odds were against him being the sire.

When she had told him, her voice was venom. "Oh, it's all right for you, with your big house and your big job. But what about me? *What about me?*"

"There are ways—people—doctors who take care of these things." It was a cheap, foul suggestion, but he was becoming used to thinking of himself as cheap and foul.

"Whaddaya think I am, a murderer? *A murderer!* I couldn't do it."

He knew for certain she had no scruples about abortion. He wondered how much the demand would be.

"All right, stop screaming. If you went away, I guess I could arrange to foot the bill."

"Oh, you could?" she replied sarcastically. "Well, it's ten thousand dollars, that's what it is. And you can consider that that's dirt cheap!"

It was preposterous! "I haven't got ten thousand—"

"You can get it! You'll get it or that wife of yours is going to get one real big shock. And your kids will know what daddy's been up to."

"Leave them out of this, you little slut!" He had to get control of himself. He forced calmness into his voice. "For ten thousand dollars I could prove you've slept with every male past sixteen on the pier."

"Go ahead and prove it." She seemed even willing to admit it. "It wouldn't help your situation."

He realized grimly that she was right. "Ten thousand would get you beat up every week for about a year."

"So I get beat up. I been beat up before. But that don't help you when old man Bledsoe finds out about you. You and your big job! Down the drain—just like that!" and she snapped her fingers.

He was surprised: how well she'd done the spade work. He'd not thought her capable of it. She knew all about his job, his family. Old Charlie Bledsoe would keep him about ten seconds after something like this came out. And where could he find another job with this over him? He could dig ditches, sure, but how far would that go in keeping a family—if he had a family after this, that is.

House, cars, job, Miriam, Wendy, George, Jr., all vanished like mist before his eyes. She had him cold,

no question about that. She was able and willing to drop a blockbuster on his entire life. Ten thousand dollars. And he was under no illusion this would be the end of it, either.

After all, he thought, she had been the first to mention murder.

He took the off ramp at Lott Avenue. Ten minutes more to the Seacliff pier. Was there any other way out? For weeks he'd been asking himself the same question. He'd offered her money on the condition she leave the area for good. She wasn't having any. Ten thousand or the story came out: she'd go to the District Attorney demanding child support. And if he went to the police and accused her of blackmail? The story would still get out; you couldn't prosecute without a plaintiff. The end result would be the same.

And the police? The girl had simply disappeared, probably run off with another man, the kind of girl she was. There was nothing to connect George Matthews with her disappearance. By the very nature of the affair, he had had to be discreet. He'd had sense enough not to let her be seen with him too often. Sure, the girl had sailed with him a couple of times. So what? She was a good sailor. How should I know what happened to her? Lie detector test? Listen, officer, you're not talking to a hunk by the railroad tracks. I'm George Matthews, Vice President of Bledsoe and Co.

You can talk to my attorney. But it would never come to that. Unless they had a body to account for, the police wouldn't be unduly concerned. And he would make damn sure there was no body to account for.

In point of fact, it was not the police that worried George Matthews. Getting caught concerned him, surely, but with due care, they would never enter the picture. It was he himself he wondered about. I am a moral man, he told himself, I have a conscience. This affair notwithstanding, I try to conduct my business and my private life in accordance with certain moral standards. I do not minimize my responsibility in this: it was like a disease, an insanity. It makes no difference that the world would possibly be better off without her; who am I to judge?

The question: can I deliberately kill and live with myself afterward? The act itself will be a horror, the aftermath worse. The answer, he told himself quite bluntly, is: I will because I must, I see no other way out that will not bring down tragedy on innocent people, people I love. But I will never never allow myself to be caught up like this again. Otherwise this ordeal, this killing, will be pointless, which will make it even worse.

He swung off the road into the smaller one that led to Seacliff. He topped a rise and could see the yacht harbor below, the masts like

the bare trees of a forest. The sea rose in steady swells beyond the breakwater. In a few minutes he had parked the car at the end of the pier. It was barely light.

He stepped aboard the *Porpoise*, feeling the easy swell as she rose in the water. Two cabins aft, salon amidship, galley forward. She'd sleep eight in a pinch, a proud little boat. The main hatch cover was open. He knew she was already aboard.

In a moment her head poked out. "You're late," she accused him with a whine. "Didja bring the money?"

He nodded and slapped his pocket. "Get down. Someone will see you."

"Just hand it over."

"I didn't say I'd decided to give it to you. I'm going out. It's the only place I can think. You may not get it."

"Let me see it."

He pulled out the envelope and gave her a glimpse of the money inside. "You can come or stay ashore, I don't care."

He was pretty sure she'd come. It was why he'd brought the money, the bait. She wouldn't be able to stand being away from that much money, not knowing. And she'd want to be on hand to remind him of the consequences.

Strangely, he thought, she gave in quicker than he'd expected. "Aw right," she said. "But I gotta be in early. I got a date."

His heart leaped. He turned on

her. "Anyone know you're here? I told you to keep your mouth shut. You think I'm going to pay you if everyone knows anyway?"

She wheedled. "Ah, George, honey. I ain't told no one. I know the position you're in."

You sure do, he thought. And that's why he believed her. If anyone else knew, even she understood there'd be no point in buying silence.

"You want I should cast off?"

"You stay below!" he snapped. Her head disappeared. He pulled back the hatch and dropped into the engine well. He turned on the fuel, started the diesel. In the cockpit he revved the motor till there was pull on the stern. He went forward and dropped the permanent anchor line, then went back and cast off the stern lines. The *Porpoise* moved slowly out of its slip.

As he guided the boat beyond the pier, he looked around to see who might have observed his departure. He could see no one. Still too early. So far, so good, he thought.

Inside the breakwater, the sea rose and fell in gradual swells. Out beyond, he could see whitecaps. There was a fair breeze, a good day for sailing. He cut the motor down and stood up and loosened the mainsail, then cranked it up. The *Porpoise* came into the wind, her sail fluttering. Next he went forward and raised the jib. Back in the cockpit he turned the wheel.

The boom swung overhead. A breeze caught the sail, billowed it out. The *Porpoise* leaned, began to move, leaving an eddy of water in her wake.

When they were well beyond the breakwater and the *Porpoise* was heeling over and cutting through the water with long, graceful dips, she came on deck.

"How far you goin' out?"

"I don't know. I told you I wanted to think. May be all day."

"It ain't going to do you no good to think. I got my mind made up."

He did not answer. She shrugged and settled herself on the lee side of the deck, her arms around her drawn-up knees. She wore her usual loose sweater and baggy dungarees. The sight of her no longer started quivers of anticipation in him. There only remained the dirty business of getting it over with.

It was after two o'clock and land had long since dropped from sight. There was nothing now but the wide expanse of ocean to witness what he had to do. Lola had spent the morning napping on deck, had twice gone below. Now she simply stared out at the ever moving water.

He called to her. "Come back here. I want to talk to you."

She looked up, got slowly to her feet and made her way back to the cockpit. His heart was pounding wildly, his hands shaking. He had to try once more.

"Are you determined to ruin me, Lola?" he pleaded.

She was kneeling just forward of the wheel. "No," she replied sullenly, her eyes downcast. "But somebody's got to take care of me."

"And if I refuse to give you any money?"

"George, we been over all this before," she said with exasperation. Her voice hardened. "You'll see what I can do!" It was almost as if someone had coached her. "Isn't your family worth that much? And your job? Your friends will spit on you when they find out."

"You'd do it, wouldn't you?"

"That's the way it is, George."

That's the way it is. Well, he asked himself, did he have a choice? He felt his chest congeal with a sudden, final tension. But when he moved, he moved quickly. His hand shot out and grabbed her by the front of the sweater. She screamed once shrilly, for no one to hear. Before she could put her hands up to protect her face, he smashed her with all his might on the point of her jaw.

She sagged down into the cockpit, unconscious. George Matthews placed his hands about her throat and closed his eyes. He forced himself to count to a hundred slowly. Once she gave an unconscious twist but he tightened his grip. Then abruptly, a long time later, it seemed, he knew she was dead. The only thing he was conscious of was the steady flapping of the sail and

the fact that he wished he would never have to open his eyes.

But he did open his eyes. And he was suddenly, violently sick over the side. For long minutes the retching would not stop, though his stomach was empty and spewed nothing but bile.

His only thought was to get the rest over with as quickly as possible. His legs would hardly support him as he climbed from the cockpit. It was worse than he'd thought. He'd not reckoned the act of murder would take so much from him.

He made his way to the forward sail compartment. From it he pulled a large nylon fishing net, a few yards of heavy chain and a large heavy canvas bag. He spread the fishing net out on the deck forward of the cockpit. Then he forced himself to bring the girl out and put her on it. He wrapped the chain around her, around her legs, her arms, her neck. Then he rolled her up in the net. She was hardly visible. With an effort he got the bundle into the canvas bag.

Sweat poured from him. He looked about. He was shaking violently. There was nothing but the vast open expanse of the ocean. He tipped the bag over the side. For a moment it stayed near the surface and he had the sudden, terrible premonition that it would not sink. But the bag filled with water and started to go down, down, leaving only a trail of bubbles to trace its course.

He knew it would never be recovered. The body would decompose long before the nylon fish netting rotted. For a long time he stood there watching the water, as if hypnotized. He imagined her going deeper and deeper. It was the worst thing he'd ever done, and the hardest. But it was finished now, over with. The depravity was ended. Never again, never again, never again. It ran through his mind like a monotonous chant, a reassuring barrier from the edge of insanity.

He was roused by the mainsail flapping. The *Porpoise* was riding in the wind. Better set course for home, he thought, get away from here. Dark by the time he made Seaciff. A long day.

He turned and saw the man half out of the opened hatch. He leaned on his hairy arms, watching George. He did not speak. In one hand he held a huge blue-black .45 automatic.

George stared, thinking it must be an apparition. *It had to be*. His mind was playing tricks. But suddenly he knew this was no trick, that the man and the gun were real. The cold spot of fright in his chest began to grow. And he recognized the man, Lola's hairy-ape lover.

"Mighty neat, my friend," the man finally said. "No blood, no mess, no body. A dirty business, but you were real neat."

"How did you get here?" George demanded. His mind was congealed. He saw his entire world be-

gin to disintegrate, like a mirror shattered in very slow motion. If only he could slip over the side, end it, go sinking, sinking. . . .

"Oh, I been aboard all day," the man said lazily. "You don't think Lola would have risked coming out with you alone, do you?"

"What do you want?" he asked in a whisper.

"The ten grand, friend. What else?"

Slowly George Matthew's mind began to function. This man had been behind the shakedown all along. Lola wouldn't have had the brains—or the nerve. He said, "You saw—"

"I saw it all, friend. I'm sorry I couldn't have saved her."

The ultimate betrayal. Poor Lola, he thought, and felt a quick stab of compassion. "If you damn well think—" he began and started for the man.

The hand with the gun came up quick, the muzzle roared, a terrible singing went past his ear. George stopped.

"I can shoot straighter than that, friend," the other said. "The next time I will. Now the money."

George knew he had no choice. He pulled the envelope from his pocket and tossed it over. The man caught it in the air with his free hand.

"Now get down and take the wheel. We're going back."

He did as he was told. The hairy man came up out of the hatchway,

perched himself on the cabin.

In the cockpit, adjusting the main sheet, George Matthews' mind began to race in a dizzy whirl. There would be no police, only this hairy ape sucking his last penny, holding this worse threat over him. Killing Lola had been useless. He thought, idiotically, his day had been wasted. The thought struck him as funny and he began to laugh.

But once he started laughing, he could not stop. That was what was so funny about murder. Once you started, you had to go on and on. Already he knew he would have to kill this man. And eventually— It was really funnier than hell. He felt the tears stinging his eyes and he knew his laughter had a high-pitched, hysterical ring, but for the life of him he couldn't stop.



Morton Beamer was a true entrepreneur. He had a gift for finding the new and unusual . . . the novelties that enticed customers to his little shop and made his business thrive.

THE NOVELTY SHOP



BY

DONALD TOTHE

THE December sun dropped, rapidly, into the nearby Pacific. The corner lamp-post, in front of "Beamer's Novelty Shop" cast a dark shadow that stretched across Paxton Avenue. The small store, a permanent fixture in Santa Monica, looked deserted, except for the shelves and glass cases and tables, overflowing with novelties.

In the window, carelessly scattered about, were: fake spiders and snakes, made of rubber, and lizards and mice and tarantulas, too; decks of fortune-telling cards; ashtrays, napkins, and towels, covered with sly insinuations; magic sets, with trick handcuffs and mirrors and handkerchiefs; and the old standby, the mysterious "Ouija Board."

A figure appeared in the lighted doorway at the back of the darkened store. The man moved between the rows of tables to a position near the cluttered window.

Surprised at the darkness, Morton Beamer switched on the lights at each side of the window. He pulled the hanging chain-cord, flooding most of the room with light, but leaving the corners semi-dark. Especially the corner where the skeleton dangled from the ceiling.

He stood, for a moment, his arm suspended in the air, his hand on the glass knob at the end of the chain, then he smiled to himself.

He had forgotten to turn on the light for his new display—a shining, red skull, macabre but fascinating, mounted on a white, cylindrical column, six inches high. It occupied the center position in the window. He pressed a button near the bottom of the stand and a bulb inside the skull started blinking, sending beams of blue-colored light through the eye-holes, the mouth-gap, and the ugly emptiness where a nose had once been.

He knew the morbid gimmick would attract attention. He counted on it to bring in a flock of new customers.

Morton sat down behind the counter, near the register. He opened a stamp catalog.

Behind, and above him, near the ceiling, a row of sneering, laughing, and grinning masks looked

down over his shoulder. And a motley lineup it was—a thin-faced, pointed-chinned, horn-topped Devil, a foaming-at-the-mouth wolf-man, a laughing clown, a grim-faced Indian—no doubt Geronimo—and a staring Frankenstein, complete with head-electrodes.

Morton continued to study a Belgium Air-Mail through a three-inch magnifying glass, when the bell over the door jangled the entrance of a customer.

It wasn't a customer, though. It was Jake, a novelty salesman. Jake, nattily dressed, carrying a bulging briefcase, flashed that big smile of his and waited for Morton to acknowledge his presence. But Morton only steadied the magnifier in his right hand and ran his other hand up his forehead and over the top of his head, smoothing back the sparse clump of dry, thinning, graying, unkempt hair. The edge of his lips drooped as his mouth opened in an expression that showed he might be having a stomach cramp.

Jake shook his head, allowing the usual shiver to run down his spine. This stop on his route always made him uneasy. It wasn't anything he could really put his finger on—just a feeling he got when he was in Beamer's place. A kindly smile usually played at Morton's thin lips. It was a smile that would go perfectly well on an old man with twinkling, blue eyes. But his eyes—looking out from behind

a pair of old-fashioned, metal-framed glasses—weren't blue. They were grayish-green. And they didn't twinkle—they stared with a concentration so intense that Jake couldn't look into them for more than a few seconds without shuddering.

Jake wondered, as he watched the storekeeper, which world he was in now. With Morton, it wasn't a case of *whether* he was in another world—it was a case of *which* world because he spent so much time daydreaming that everyone assumed there were many worlds his mind visited. That was the reason, Jake thought, for that faraway, empty look in his eyes.

Jake was on his monthly trip to the southern part of the state. He scanned the counters for any new items Morton might be carrying. He'd already spotted the skull in the window. It was hard to miss and it hadn't been there on his last trip.

"Hiya, Morton," he said, loudly, trying to sound cheerful.

Morton glanced up, over the top of his glasses, which had slid down on his nose. He nodded. "Hello, Jake." He spoke in tired monotones. "Been expecting you."

Jake set his briefcase on the counter and opened it. He wanted to show his new samples, take the order, and leave as soon as possible. Especially since he hadn't been able to reach Sally.

It was hard to believe Beamer

was married to a woman like Sally. It was hard to believe he was married at all.

Sally Beamer. A redhead, short, tiny but well-proportioned, and fun-loving, she was Jake's favorite. And he had one in every town.

How she ever got stuck with Beamer was a mystery to Jake, except he'd heard a rumor that Beamer had a lot of dough stashed away.

"See you got a new display?" Jake asked.

"Yes. Eve-catching, isn't it?" He hesitated, pushing back his glasses with a stiff forefinger. "A fellow stopped in with it last week. He had them in all different colors. I picked red. Sally's favorite, you know."

Jake didn't like the tone of the "you know," but he ignored it as he watched, fascinated, the light beam go on and off, making the red skull in the window look like it had a living, breathing pulse. It was surrounded by hundreds of other things but it stood out like Marilyn Monroe at a Girl Scout meeting.

Morton took a bottle and two glasses from behind the counter, pointing the bottle toward Jake, and asking, with his vacant eyes, if Jake would join him.

Jake, never one to turn down free booze, nodded, but he picked up the glass and inspected it before Morton poured the drink.

"Just want to make sure it's not one of them dripping ones," he

said, laughing, still not sure whether Morton was one for practical jokes.

Jake gulped half the drink, letting its warmth drain down through his chest and hoping it would lessen his senses to the musky, cellarlike odor in the room.

"How's Sally?" He asked, casually, looking toward the rear of the store. The same thing had happened this trip that happened the last two months—he'd called at the wrong moment and she hadn't been able to answer his signal. She'd managed, the other times, to get in touch with him before he left town but there was never time to do anything but say hello. He hoped, tonight, she could get away sooner.

"Fine," Morton answered. "Sally's fine." The thick lenses added a sleepy dullness to his eyes. "She went to 'Frisco to see her mother. Be gone a month or so."

"Left you alone with the store, huh?" Jake said, hiding his disappointment. He took some boxes out of the briefcase and spread them on the counter. He didn't use his usual sales pitch. As always, he allowed Morton to study the samples by himself.

Jake made an inspection of the store, going from one table to the next. There was nothing new on the first table—the same thousand-and-one different small tricks: hand-buzzers, trick locks, squirt rings, nail puzzles, magic coins,

loaded dice, ad infinitum. Across from the table, on the counter, was a row of wigs, ranging from snow-white to rose-pink to red to bright purple. On the same counter were large, false eye-lashes, long sideburns, bushy mustaches, and beards, from a red, pointed goatee to a full-fledged Santa Claus growth.

The next table was a party table—some of the items Jake handled—with cocktail and shot glasses, etched in bawdy witticisms, napkins, embroidered with corny sayings, novelty mixing rods, and trick ice-cube-makers.

Jake returned to the register, swallowed the rest of his drink, then strolled to the back of the store, where Morton had a new table.

"See you got some other new stuff?" He asked, studying the table's contents.

"Yes. Same fellow that brought that." He motioned with his eyes, over the top of his glasses, toward the skull in the window.

Jake read the label attached to a long, narrow box. It read, "To Bone-Up On Finals." He opened the box. It contained an authentic-looking human thigh-bone. "I bet the college boys will eat this up," he said, disgustedly.

On the same table, there were sandwich-sized plastic bags, each filled with an assortment of small bones. Some of the bags were labeled, "Gift for the man who has

everything—a bag of bones." Others read, "Gift for the friend who always has a bone to pick with you."

He glanced at Morton, who smiled back at him.

"Damned things are getting sicker all the time!" Jake said.

Morton failed to understand. "Sicker?"

"Yeah. Sicker. Jokes are sicker. Greeting cards are sicker. Novelties are sicker. People are sicker. Sick. Morbid. Gruesome. Disgusting. What the hell's this world coming to, anyway?"

"That's not as bad as some things that go on," Morton answered, cryptically, as he walked toward Jake. He put his hand on the pink wig and stroked it. He smiled, then stroked the next one—the red one—as if he were stroking a woman's head.

Jake was uneasy. "What was that guy, anyway? A bone specialist?" He looked at a stack of boxes, the top one of which was open. The label on it was, "For the Ribber."

Inside the box was the perfect facsimile of a rib.

Jake began to feel the effects of the drink. The room swayed.

"How long did you wait last night?" Morton asked, looking directly into Jake's eyes.

"What?" Jake felt like a small boy who has been caught stealing by his mother. "What do you mean?"

"I heard you signal. I just won-

dered how long you waited for my wife to call you back."

"Hell!" Jake thought. "*He knows all about it.*"

Jake didn't know which way to run or what to say or what to do. He thought of leaving his sample case right where it was, walking out of the shop without looking back, and never returning.

It would be a helleva lot easier if Morton was the type who would take a swing at him. But Morton only stared and Jake had to turn away from the staring eyes.

As he turned, he found his own eyes to be focused on the table-full of bone novelties. Then, slowly, a black, ugly thought made its way from somewhere in the depths of his mind, and he turned to look, stupidly, at the skull in the window. Studying it more closely, he realized it was an unusually small, delicate skull.

Morton continued to stroke the red hair. "Pretty hair, isn't it?" He asked.

Jake blinked. His head suddenly felt like it was being unscrewed from his shoulders. He staggered against the counter. He tried to speak but all he could do was cough.

He spun around and landed, with a thud, on his back.

He looked up through the glass display-case and felt Morton's eyes pinning him to the floor. The masks above Morton's head began closing in on Jake.

Morton's face blended into line as Jake's eyes stopped focusing.

Morton smiled down at the body, stepped out from behind the counter, and walked to the front door. He turned the sign around, snapped the lock, and pulled down the shade.

Before he clicked off the lights, he studied, for a minute or so, his window display.

Now, he had a problem. Should he balance the display by putting one at each end?

Or, would they look better, side by side?



YOUR
COMMUNITY

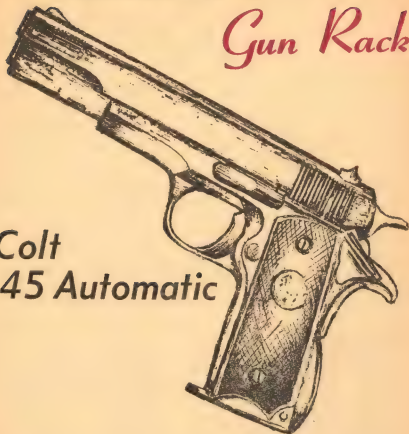
...is a better place
to live and work
because
you gave
the United Way



MANHUNT'S

Gun Rack

Colt .45 Automatic



The COLT GOVERNMENT MODEL .45 AUTOMATIC PISTOL is probably the most famous automatic in the world. It has for years been the official side arm of all the United States military services. It fires .45 calibre automatic cartridges from a quickly replaceable magazine that holds seven bullets. Simply and ruggedly constructed, it has withstood the toughest of Government testing and proved itself unsurpassed in reliability, efficiency and power.

Two white men confined together for a long time on a small Pacific island can find the going rather rough. Is almost killed Smythe.

BREAK DOWN

BY

ROBERT

EDMOND

ALTER

THE OUTSTATION was situated on one of those smaller islands midway between Vangunu and Guadalcanal in the Solomons. It was a negligible volcanic structure quite removed from worldly importance. Its population consisted of a pack of wild dogs and a larger pack of bush rats, both indigenous to the island: a hundred or so native Melanesians with some admixture of Polynesian blood, recruits from Malaita: and Smythe and Hern, the two company men in charge of the cacao plantation.

I was a company man myself, and had been brought from Honiara by a chartered schooner for the express purpose of relieving Smythe from duty. The arrangements for the emergency (I could

only assume from the urgent request from the company that I hasten to the island with a doctor, that it *was* an emergency) had been made willy-nilly. And the facts of the case were, unfortunately, obscured due to Hern's lack of foresight in sending to Honiara a Kanaka, who spoke only *bêche-de-mer*, a language with a very limited vocabulary. The only enlightenment that could be gathered from his peculiar mode of communication was that Hern had said to him—"Hey, you fella boy, go look'm eye belong you along Honiara. Bring'm one big fella marster belong Com'any. That big fella marster Smy' belly belong him walk about too much."

The doctor that I brought along

was an admixture himself; Malayan and Australian, I believe; and it is quite possible that this was his first personal case. I recall on at least a dozen separate occasions during our short voyage his murmuring to me that he did so hope that it wasn't Black-water fever. To which I could only reply, "Well, we'll soon know." The reason for this vagueness is that to a Kanaka the phrase "belly belong him walk about too much" doesn't necessarily denote a sick stomach. It can mean anything from a hangover to a broken neck.

Hern met us on the beach. He was a tall, angular man with that peculiar sandy complexion that is seen so often in the South Pacific, and that suffers so outrageously from exposure to tropic sun. He murmured a sort of greeting and shook our hands, though it was obvious the gesture was purely automatic. He was a very harassed young man.

"You'll be taking Smythe back to Honiara, Doctor?" he asked, and, without waiting for a reply, added—"It would be wise to get him into hospital—or something—as soon as possible."

"Yes, yes, but what *is* it?" the doctor insisted nervously. "It isn't Black-water fever, is it?"

But Hern tossed a startled glance over his shoulder and said, "You'll see . . . my boys are bringing him down. I really think we'd better get him aboard and on his way."

I was not only startled when I saw what the boys were "bringing down", I was dumfounded. It was a white man strapped to a make-shift litter. Yes, strapped . . . arms, chest, legs, feet and neck. And due to his writhing and the unintelligible sounds he was making, I considered Hern's advice expedient.

"Insane," Hern said with an air of resignation. "Hopelessly insane. My fault. I'm to blame. I brought it on. I thought I had the right of it but I was mistaken."

"But how? What cause?" the doctor gasped.

"Frustration," Hern said simply. "Pure frustration. Awfully sorry."

After we had seen them off, Hern dropped his narrow hand on my shoulder . . . not as a gesture of friendship, I felt, but as a mental and physical crutch. "Let's go up to the digs," he said. "I have some gin."

"Look here," I said to him. "I can't live here with this thing hanging over us. What . . . ?"

He nodded and said, "Of course, old chap. Mean to tell you. You see, it was this rotten business about the letter . . ."

The cacao plantation was not a fit place for two sensitive white men to try and go alone. They had little or no diversion. They had read all their books, their periodicals; played all the card games into the ground; talked themselves dry; and, after six months of it—with

still another six to do—they had reached that risky stage where it was not advisable for one to mention even the most casual subject to the other without wondering if the other would reasonably snap his head off.

Once a month an inter-island boat would deliver to the two gentlemen their supplies and mail. This was fine for Smythe; there were always letters for him from home, from friends scattered far and wide, and, most important, a letter or two from the girl in Sydney he was engaged to. These latter letters were Smythe's touchstone with normalcy. More than once he had said to Hern, "If I didn't have my Jenny waiting to marry me I simply could not stick this hell. I don't know how you do it, old chap, with absolutely nothing to look forward to except your pay."

Hern had often wondered how he did it himself. He had no family; had lived a rambling life, moving from one obscure port to another . . . hence, without any sort of a permanent address, he was on no one's "sucker list"; had no steady girl to write to or that could write to him; and, presuming from the fact that he was never pestered with the duns that forever clutter the mails, was one of those unusual young men who had always shopped with cash. In short—he never received mail, while once a month, Smythe was loaded with news, ads, and required love.

It was an impossible situation and Hern resolved to amend it. He went to Smythe with a five pound note in his hand. "Look here, old fellow," he said, "you always receive a batch of letters and I none. Why not be a sport and let me buy one of your letters?"

Smythe, almost as desperately searching for novelty himself, glanced at the fiver, at his fresh packet of letters, grinned and said, "Make it seven, old man, and take your choice."

The bargain was struck. Hern paid his money and Smythe spread his mail—unopened—on the table. Hern looked it over carefully, selected the one with the latest postmark, said Thanks awfully, and went off to his room with his possession.

That night at dinner Smythe asked casually, "By the by, old dear, what was my letter about?"

But Hern shook his head. "Can't tell you, old man. It's mine now."

Smythe found this surprising attitude rather annoying, though he let it ride for then. However, he didn't sleep well that night and in the morning he approached Hern again. "Look here, old thing, I simply must know what was in that letter. It may be important to me."

"Wasting your time, old friend. You forget—I bought the letter."

For a week Smythe wouldn't talk to Hern. He pouted and fretted, wondered and cursed, and ended up muttering dire threats to him-

self. Finally, humiliated, at the tether's end, he went to Hern again, this time with the seven pounds in hand. "Here," he said harshly, "take your filthy money back and let me have my letter. I will not spend another day on this buggy island without knowing what was in it . . ." He checked himself, seeing Hern's headshake, then shouted, "All right! If that's your sort—that'll hold a chap up . . . take ten and be damned to you! Here, I'll make it fourteen!"

But Hern was adamant. "You really must stop this sort of thing, old chap," he said. "The letter is personal to me. You can't have it back. Besides—I burned it."

"You what? Burned my letter?"

"No, no, old bean—my letter. I believe I may destroy my own mail if I wish. Now let's drop it. What do you say to a drink?"

"Hern—" Smythe said emotionally, "I demand that you tell me what was in my letter."

"Look here," Hern replied stiffly, "I'm getting rather sick of this. I'll tell you for the last time . . . that letter was my personal property. You have no right to ask me to divulge its contents. I'm not going to tell you. Now, will you have that drink or not?"

Smythe broke out an oath, more of a scream than an oath really, and bolted for his room. He was

back in a moment bearing the outstation's one weapon—an antiquated Springfield. He began firing from the hip.

Hern looked at me and shook his head. "Fortunately," he said, "Smythe was too distraught to think of aiming, and, too, the clip in the rifle was nearly empty before he began. With the help of the houseboys, I disarmed him. That's when I sent the Kanaka to Honiara."

He glanced at me and interpreted my expression correctly. "I imagine," he said haltingly, "that you believe I behaved rather badly in this affair. I see now that I did . . . but I thought at the time I was doing the right thing."

"Look here," I said flatly, "I don't give a damn about your principles. But if you think I'm going to stay here without knowing what was in that letter, you're greatly . . ."

"Oh, I don't mind telling you," he said openly. "Tried to tell Smythe when I saw what had happened, but it was too late. It was from that girl of his in Sydney . . . one of those 'Dear John' letters, as the Yanks call them. She was writing Smythe to tell him she'd met a man and that they were going to be married. Now I ask you, old chap . . . what would you have done?"



COP IN A FRAME

BY DICK ELLIS



Suspended detective David Weldon could see the headlines: "Sadistic cop beats helpless prisoner!" And the prisoner had the bruises to prove it. Detective Weldon shook his head in disbelief . . . he knew he hadn't touched the man.

THE CAPTAIN'S FACE was fiery red. He sat behind the desk, clenching and unclenching his fists. He didn't look at me as he said, "You stupid bastard. I'd like to—"

He broke off. He shook his bald head. Picking up my service file, he read, "David Weldon. Detective first-class. Eight years in the Department. Two citations, and—how old are you, Weldon?"

"Twenty-nine," I said between my clenched teeth.

"No kidding," the captain said, heavily sarcastic. "The stunt you pulled today, I thought maybe you were about ten."

He waited for me to start cussing. But I didn't. I wasn't going to make it easy for him. There were just the two of us in Captain Snyder's office, on the second floor of the precinct house. I glanced toward the frosted glass door across the room.

Not a sound from the detectives' squadroom outside. The guys—my pals, my buddies—would be standing around out there, straining their ears to hear what was going on in the office. I brought my attention back to Captain Snyder.

"Listen," I said loudly, "I'll tell you again. I didn't touch that bum. I don't know a thing about it."

Snyder's pale blue eyes were twin icicles, jabbing into me. "No? Let's look at it again. Late this afternoon, you and your partner answer a squeal. You bring in one

Jack Mancino, charged with assaulting some woman. A doctor examines Mancino, right here in this office, and there's not a mark on him, outside of a couple small bruises on his arms. Which he probably got in the struggle with the woman. Okay. Your partner stays here to write up the report. You take Mancino downtown to the main jail."

The captain stood up. He planted his fists on the desk, leaned his big heavy body toward me. His face was pale now.

"From here to the jail is a ten minute ride," he said. "But it takes you a full half-hour to get there—"

"Damn it," I broke in. "I told you and told you—I had a blowout. I had to stop and change tires on the cruiser."

"Yeah. You told me. And when you get Mancino to the jail and book him, he's crying like a baby. He's ready to sign a confession. Rape, murder—you name it, he'll confess it. He's obviously scared to death of you. You, Weldon. He can't wait for them to lock him up. An hour later, at seven p.m., his lawyer arrives. The first thing Jack Mancino does is take off his shirt. And his chest and belly are covered with big red welts. Somebody has beat the holy hell out of him. Now you stand here and tell me you didn't touch him."

I ran clawed fingers through my hair. I said desperately, "I don't know how or when or where Man-

cino got like that—but I didn't—"

"He says you did. And he's got the scars to prove it."

Snyder turned his head, and spat on the floor beside his desk. "The only thing I don't get is—why? You have a good record. So why'd you all of a sudden turn tough guy? Surely you didn't think you could get away with it, in this day and age? I can see the headlines—'Sadistic cop beats helpless prisoner.' Jesus."

Suddenly I felt sweat popping out on my forehead. My heart thudded at my ribs. There was something the captain didn't know. And I wasn't about to tell him. He'd find out soon enough. When he did. . . .

"Get out," Snyder was saying. "Go home. Go to hell. But be here at ten tomorrow morning, ready to face a board. You're suspended from duty—permanently, for all of me."

I opened my mouth, shut it again. What was the use? I left the office. Snyder didn't say goodbye.

In the squadroom, the boys were very busy. So busy no one had time to look at me. Only my partner, Pete Branden, and he just shrugged his meaty shoulders, then turned away.

I went on out to the corridor. Pulling the door shut, I stood there a minute, staring at the faded lettering on the wooden panel: *15th Precinct. Detective Squad.*

Through the door I heard an

angry voice. "Branden, you work with that jerk. Is he crazy, or just plain stupid?"

I didn't wait to hear anymore.

The parking lot where I left my car during duty hours was a block from the station house. The weather had turned cold. A gray drizzle sifted down from the black sky. I didn't notice. The hands of an illuminated clock on a store near the parking lot read eight-fifteen.

It was only about half an hour since I'd learned of the lousy mess I was in. It seemed a lot longer.

I walked through the deserted, dark lot to my car. I got in. I sat there looking at the raindrops spattering on the windshield. Then, as I poked the key into the ignition lock, I felt a movement in the back seat behind me.

As I ducked to the side, something swished through the blackness, hit me a glancing blow on the head. It didn't put me out. But for a moment I couldn't move. I felt hands scrabbling at my suit-jacket. A hoarse voice whispered: "Damn, damn, damn."

Then the hands found my .38, tried to jerk it from its holster on my belt. I forced my arms up, forced myself to turn on the seat, fumbling for a grip on the man behind me. He gave a frightened bleat. He swung again at my head. I took the blow on my forearm. My arm went numb.

He pushed me back and down, and before I could recover, he was

out of the car. I heard footsteps pounding away into the wet black night. By the time I got my door open and out of the car, he was gone. There wasn't a sound except that of traffic on the street outside the lot, and the rustle of the rain.

I got back in the car. While I waited for my heart to slow down a little, I rubbed my aching left wrist, then raised a hand and gingerly explored the side of my head. There was a lump swelling just above my ear.

"That's all I needed," I said shakily. "Some damn mug-artist." But why would a mugger pick on me? Evidently he'd known me—or at least had known I was a cop. He'd gone straight for my gun.

To hell with it. I had enough troubles.

I started the car, drove out to the street. For awhile I drove around the neighborhood. I didn't see anyone who could possibly be the man who had jumped me.

It was a fitting end to a lousy, screwed-up day.

It had started late that afternoon, not long after my partner and I came on duty at four o'clock. A pale-skinned, greasy-haired punk named Jack Mancino forced his way into the apartment of a young woman named Frances Kersh.

Mancino slapped the girl around, even made a bungling try at raping her. But her screams attracted the attention of other residents in the building. A couple of

men with apartments on the same floor had rushed in and pulled Mancino off of Miss Kersh. They held him until police arrived.

Pete Branden and I were within a block of the scene, checking out another matter. We took the call.

Mancino made no resistance—in fact, he seemed actually glad to be taken in. Some kind of psycho, I figured.

After the examination at the 15th Precinct, I'd hauled Mancino on downtown, while Pete Branden stayed behind to do the paperwork on the squeal.

And that should have been that. Only—it wasn't.

I told the captain the truth—I didn't touch Mancino. We didn't even speak during the ride. He sat there beside me on the front seat of the cruiser, his hands cuffed behind him, relaxed and calm as if we were out for a Sunday drive.

When the right rear tire blew, I turned into a sidestreet. While I changed tires, Mancino didn't make a move, except once when he stuck his head out the window to look back at me, with a big grin on his schoolgirlish face.

Then, at the jail, he suddenly went into this bawling and squalling act. He huddled down in a corner of the booking-office, blubbering at the jailers to keep me away from him—keep me away from him. As if I'd touch the worthless bastard with a ten-foot pole.

Though God knew I'd wanted to touch him. I'd wanted to kick his teeth down his throat. I had reasons.

Now, as I drove through the rainy night, I thought about those reasons. My palms were slippery on the steering-wheel. Because I was acquainted with the girl Mancino roughed up.

"Acquainted," hell. Frances Kersh and I were engaged to be married. And when Captain Snyder found that out, it would nail me down so tight, I'd never get free. It gave me a perfectly logical motive for belting Mancino.

Not that they needed a motive, the way I was boxed in already. Helpless anger coiled in my belly like a greasy snake. Then I thought of something. Wild, far-fetched—but at least it was something. I stepped on the gas, headed the car for my girl's place on Manfred Avenue.

As soon as Fran knew it was me ringing her bell, she threw the apartment door open and threw herself into my arms. "Whoo, boy, I'm glad to see you," she said against my chest. Inside the apartment, we took care of some things like hugging and kissing and so on.

Then I sat down in the comfortably shabby easy-chair in the small livingroom, pulled Fran down on my knees, and said, "Listen, have you had the TV or radio on?"

She widened her brown eyes at me. "Not for the last hour or so—why?"

"Nothing." I hesitated a moment, running my fingers through her mop of silky blonde hair. I'd expected to find her pretty well shaken up by her experience with Mancino. But if she was, it didn't show. I said, "I want to ask you a couple questions."

"Oh, is this official? If it is, I'd better get out of your lap."

"Never mind that," I told her, tightening my arm around her slender, pliant waist. "First off, how did this Mancino act when he busted in here?"

To my surprise, Fran started laughing. "He acted apologetic. That's the only word for it. When I opened the door, he was standing in the corridor, looking at his watch. No kidding. Like he was working on a split-second schedule or something. Then he gave me a kind of bashful smile and shoved me back into the room—and left the hall door wide open."

Fran paused. The grin lingered on her full, pink lips.

I told her to go on, and she said, "Well, he slapped at me a couple of times. He fumbled at my blouse and tried to pull up my skirt. But he didn't try very hard. Actually, Dave, he seemed to be more concerned with keeping *me* from hitting him. I was yelling and swinging with both fists—"

"We saw the bruises on his

arms," I put in.

"Really? I didn't know I could hit that hard. Anyhow, when my neighbors ran in here, Mancino practically welcomed them with open arms. The whole thing was just plain goofy."

I nodded. My idea didn't seem so far-fetched now.

As with any cop, I'd had my share of dealings with psychos. Some of them would do any damn weird thing to get attention. Get their names in the papers. Mancino fit the picture—almost.

"How come you have so much free time tonight?" Fran asked. "I thought you were on the night watch this week."

"I was," I said. I told her about it. As I did, I got up, paced around the small, cheerfully cluttered room. When I finished, Fran's brown eyes sparkled with anger.

"That's the dirtiest trick I ever heard of," she snapped. "But why should this man want to get you in trouble?"

I looked down at her thoughtfully. I shook my head. "He wasn't out to frame me, personally. He couldn't have known Pete and I were in the neighborhood, and would take the call. On top of that, Mancino sure couldn't have counted on me taking him downtown. It could just have easily been Pete. No, Mancino just wanted to put it to a cop—any cop. . . ."

My voice trailed away. The whole thing was one hell of a co-

incidence, Mancino roughing up my girl—of all the girls in the city—and then me being the one to take him in.

But simple, everyday coincidences are among the biggest pains in the neck in police work. And, as I told Fran, it was just impossible for Mancino to know in advance how things would work out.

I had the hell of a headache, centered in the big lump above my left ear. I asked Fran if she had some aspirins.

While she was out of the room, I turned on the TV set for the nine o'clock news. It was just coming on. The first item was the Mancino bit. The newscaster jumped all over the screen with moral indignation.

Fran came back with the aspirins. By then I really needed them. We sat down on the sofa, watched the TV in silence.

"One of the most blatant cases of police brutality in this city's history," the reporter yammered. And, "... According to the victim's attorney, Detective David Weldon stopped the police car in a deserted side street, shoved Mr. Mancino against the righthand front door of the car, and then viciously beat the helpless prisoner with a blackjack, cursing him and threatening to kill him if Mr. Mancino shouted for help. . . ."

A series of photographs of Mancino came on the screen. Several close-ups of his body, naked above

the waist. His chest and belly were criss-crossed with ugly, elongated welts.

The kind of marks a blackjack might leave, if you swung it back and forth across a guy's body, like a short whip. And I always carried a blackjack in my hip pocket.

The TV reporter was saying, "... Fearful of further beatings, Mr. Mancino did not inform authorities of his condition when he was placed in the city's main jail. He waited until his attorney arrived an hour later, and then—"

I reached out to turn off the TV. But Fran put her hand on my arm, stopping me. Now the reporter socked in the clincher. "In a late development, it has been discovered that Detective Weldon is friendly with the woman Mr. Mancino allegedly attacked this afternoon. . . . District Attorney Kranmeyer told newsmen he may file felony charges against Weldon. Mr. Kranmeyer, obviously upset by this obviously brutal—"

This time I did turn off the set. Glancing at Fran, I saw she looked as sick as I felt. She said, "Dave, tell me the truth. You did hit Mancino, didn't you?"

"No," I said angrily. "Up until the minute he was thrown in a cell, he was okay. I know he was. He was with me every second. Whatever happened, happened at the jail."

Fran lit a cigarette. Her slim hands were trembling. She didn't look at me. She didn't believe me.

And I couldn't blame her. I was beginning to doubt my own memory.

Maybe I had blacked out while I was hauling Mancino downtown. I'd been mad as hell. Maybe—but damn it, I remembered the whole time perfectly. No gaps.

Now, I had to get out of there. Away from Fran's remote silence. I had to move around. Yeah. Like a caught fish flopping on a big sharp hook.

I put on my topcoat, and told Fran, "I'll see you tomorrow. If I'm not in jail."

She didn't try to keep me. At the door, I kissed her goodnight. It was like kissing a stranger. When I got outside the building, it was still raining. The night was wet and cold, and black as my thoughts. I checked the back seat before getting into my car.

I halfway hoped I'd find another would-be mugger hiding there. That was something I knew how to handle. But of course I didn't find anyone.

I got in, drove through the pelting rain to a neighborhood bar a few blocks from Fran's place. I went inside and had a drink. I had two. It didn't help. Then I walked to the phone booth at the end of the noisy, crowded barroom. I called the main jail.

When the night man came on the line, he wasn't glad to hear from me. He said, "Weldon, there's no use trying to bring us into this

mess. You couldn't pull any funny business here—not unless you first bought off all the guards, the civilian employees, and the prisoners in the cell-block. Huh uh. No one went near Mancino's cell after he was booked in. Except when a trusty took him some food about six-fifteen. With a guard standing there watching every move that was made. Mancino didn't eat a bit—I guess he was hurting too bad.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “But—is there any possible way he could have roughed himself up?”

The jailer said disgustedly, “Come off it. He was in a bare cell, with empty cells on either side. Not a thing there he could have used. And he sure didn't take anything in with him. Afterwards, all he got was some Irish stew on a paper plate and a tin spoon. Big deal. Listen, Weldon. They've got you cold—Mancino's story makes sense. There's no way to get around the fact he was worked over—before he got here to the jail. So why don't you just take what you got coming?”

I gritted my teeth. “Where is he now?”

“How should I know? His lawyer bailed him out a little after seven. The jail doctor had treated him, gave him some pain-killer pills to take, and told him to go home to bed. Looks like what he really did was go straight to the newspapers and TV stations. We'll

be lucky if the D. A. doesn't start yelling for a shake-up of the whole damn department.”

He called me a few short, ugly names, and hung up.

I hadn't expected to get anything. I hadn't. There was just no way Mancino could have got beaten up. But he had.

I went back to the bar, ordered another drink—a double-shot. It was pushing ten o'clock. Twelve hours until the departmental board would lower the boom on me tomorrow morning. Unless the D. A. got in his licks first, by getting out a felonious assault warrant on me tonight. He might do just that—there was no love lost between the D. A. and the police department.

I'd better go to my place, get my shaving-gear and a clean shirt, then go on to a motel for the night. I didn't want the D. A.'s boys rousing me out of bed in the wee hours. I finished my drink and left the bar.

I had a couple of crummy rooms in an old apartment house on 24th Street. When I got there, I drove slowly around the block. I didn't spot anyone who looked like he might be waiting for me. But to be on the safe side, I pulled into the alley behind the building.

I went up the wet, slippery iron fire-escape. I hoped to hell none of the other tenants looked out and saw me sneaking past their windows. At the third-floor landing, I used my knife-blade to flick back

the catch on my bedroom window. I eased the window up, squinted into the apartment.

No sound, no light, no nothing. Pushing the curtains aside, I climbed in. I walked quietly across the familiar room to the light-switch by the door. Then I stopped short, listening.

The bedroom door was open, and through it came the sound of someone moving around in the livingroom beyond. I held my breath. Then whoever was in there began to whistle softly. Evidently, he hadn't heard me come in the window. Now what the hell?

The D. A.'s men wouldn't be waiting in the dark. They'd have on every light in the house. I opened my topcoat and suit jacket, unsnapped the catch and pulled my .38 from its holster on my belt.

Carefully placing one foot in front of the other, I eased through the door, felt along the livingroom wall to my left. There was a light-switch there. I lifted my gun, aimed it toward the sound of the soft, tuneless whistling. I turned on the light.

The sudden glare blinded me for a moment. Then I saw my uninited guest jumping up from a chair that faced the front door of the apartment. As he turned toward me, I saw the snub-nosed pistol in his right hand. He gave a startled yelp.

"Drop it," I said. I recognized the guy. I thumbed back the ham-

mer of my gun. He dropped his gun, and his arms shot up above his head.

"Wait a minute," he croaked. "Wait a minute, Weldon. I just want to talk to you—the boss sent me."

I walked over to him. He was called Frankie Thomas. It wasn't his real name, but it was as good as any. "Yeah?" I said. "Talk about what?"

Thomas was tall, boney, bald-headed, and wore thick-lensed glasses. He looked like a tubercular bookkeeper. He wasn't. He was one of the best muscle-men in town. He'd been up for murder at least three times—each time the case dismissed for lack of evidence. A nice guy.

He worked for Lee Peregrin, another nice guy. If you happened to like big-time narcotics peddlers.

"It's like this," Thomas said rapidly. "The boss heard about the trouble you're in. He wants to help you out."

I laughed. "Lee Peregrin wants to help me? Jesus. You'll have to do better than that, Frankie."

"No, it's straight. What the hell, we can all get along. Lee can put the word in the right places, take the heat off you. Then . . . well, Lee can always use a good man."

His hands started down. I wagled my gun, and they went back up. I said slowly, "Lee's feeling the pinch, ah? He knows he's just about run out his string."

Thomas shrugged, grinned at me chummily.

My partner Pete Branden and I had been working up a case against Peregrin—one of the big wheels in the Statewide narcotics racket. We were right on the verge of nailing Peregrin and his whole lousy operation. A few more days, and he would be out of business—permanently.

In fact, Pete and I were checking on a tip one of Pete's informants had given him concerning the case, that afternoon, when we'd got the radio call about Mancino.

Since then, I'd been so worried about my personal screw-up with Mancino, I hadn't gotten around to wondering if there could be any possible connection between that and the Peregrin case. I wondered now.

It almost cost me my life.

One second Frankie Thomas was standing there in front of me, his pale eyes magnified behind the thick glasses staring at me without expression. The next second one of his long skinny arms chopped down in a blur of speed. The edge of his flattened palm axed into my right wrist. My gun flew out of my hand.

Throwing up my arms, I blocked his next judo chop that would have snapped my neck if it had landed. I lunged into Thomas, brought up a knee into his crotch, and he grunted with pain. But it didn't stop him.

He hooked a foot behind my ankle and shoved. I went down flat on my back. He jumped for me, feet first. I managed to roll out of the way, and came up on my knees, swinging wildly. One of my fists plowed into his belly.

He staggered back, cursing, "Damn, damn, damn——"

Now I threw myself across the floor, going for my gun. I got it and jumped to my feet. I saw I was a little late. Thomas had a .45 automatic in his fist—should have known he'd be carrying two guns. But he didn't fire.

Instead he squealed, "Stop it, stop it."

I dodged away, snapped off a quick shot. It missed him. He yelled and headed for the front door. As he ran, he showed the .45 toward me and cut loose. Heavy slugs cut the air above my head as I dropped to the floor. One bullet hit the ceiling light, plunging the room into darkness.

I fired at him as he went out the door into the hallway. He staggered, grabbed his arm, but he kept moving. By the time I reached the door, Thomas was at the stairs diagonally across the hall from my place. He swung around, bared teeth glinting in the dim light. His left arm dangled at his side. Blood dripped from limp fingers, splattered the carpet.

With his right hand he raised the .45. He blasted away. A slug tore a hunk out of the door-jamb near

my head, spraying splinters of wood into my face. I triggered my gun.

Thomas went over backward, headfirst down the stairs. I could hear his body clattering down to the landing on the floor below. Then there was silence. My ears felt numb from the racket the guns had made. The stench of cordite in the musty air made me want to throw up.

Voices began calling back and forth in the other apartments in the building. All I wanted to do was sit down and shake.

But not until I checked on Frankie Thomas. I went down the stairs, found him lying on his back, one leg doubled beneath him. Blood gushed from his arm and chest, forming a dark sticky pool on the wooden floor under his body. He was alive.

I knelt beside him. His hands plucked feebly at my coat. "Where's my glasses?" he panted. "Can't see without them."

Opening his blood-soaked shirt, I looked at the wound just below his breast-bone. From the amount of blood pumping out, the bullet must have cut the big artery there. I tried to swallow the sour vomit that surged up in my throat.

By now, people were coming out into the corridors, coming hesitantly toward us. I ignored them. I told Frankie Thomas, "You're all through. So tell me——"

"Get Weldon," he breathed. He

blinked his pale, watery eyes. "But it's got to look like suicide . . . or no good."

I leaned closer. "Did you try it earlier tonight?"

"Tried at—parking lot," he whispered. "But—too risky there. . . . Wait for Weldon at his apartment. Got to look like suicide." A thick red worm crawled from the corner of his blue lips, wriggled down his slack jaw.

"Weldon getting too close," he muttered. "Got to get rid of him—quick. . . . Frame him. Stick it to him good—Jack Mancino can do it—then, nobody ever believe anything Weldon says. Besides—" He choked, and more blood spewed from his mouth. "Besides, Weldon will be dead, see? A suicide . . . all nice and neat. Everything okay then. No more trouble."

Suddenly he came up on his elbows. "Oh, Christ," he said, and fell back.

Getting to my feet, I looked around the circle of people that had gathered. "Has someone called the police?" I asked. I hardly recognized my own voice. It sounded like a file grating on a rusty iron bar.

A man I knew slightly nodded. "They're coming."

"Alright. Tell the officers I'll be down to the precinct house later," I said. I pushed through the crowd of white-faced, wide-eyed men and women. No one tried to stop me. They were too busy gawking at

Frankie Thomas.

But Frankie didn't mind. He was dead.

I went back up to my apartment. I stopped there just long enough to stick a pint of rye whisky into my topcoat pocket. As I went through the apartment to the bedroom, I heard sirens screaming in the street in front of the building. I climbed out the window, down the fire-escape to the alley, where I'd left my car. I got the hell out of there.

After I'd put several blocks between the apartment building and myself, I pulled over to the curb on a side street and stopped the car. I was so shaky it took both hands to get the opened bottle of rye to my mouth. After a long drink, I felt better.

Then I went over what Frankie Thomas had told me.

It all fit together—up to a point. But there were several pieces missing. Until I had them, the rest was no good. I caught the reflected glare of headlights in my rear-view mirror. And a blinking red roof-light. A scout car. It came slowly along the street behind me.

I started my car, drove away. At the first intersection I turned off. The scout car didn't follow. I sighed with relief. By now, every cop in town would have orders to bring me in, because of the Thomas deal.

A traffic-light stopped me. While

I waited for it to change, I took my notebook from my jacket pocket, and checked on Mancino's home-address. It was eleven o'clock by the time I found the place—a sleazy "rooming house" in a sleazy neighborhood, on the ragged edge of the downtown business district. I parked in the driveway beside the house. I went up on the porch, knocked at the door.

Lights were on behind shaded windows to the right of the front door. A TV set was going full blast in there. I doubled a fist and pounded on the wooden door-panel.

Finally I heard someone coming. The door opened an inch. A woman croaked, "Yah? Whatcha wan't?"

"My name's Davis," I said. "I'm a private detective. I'd like to see the manager."

The door swung wide. A tall, well-stacked woman peered out. She swayed back and forth. "No kidding?" she croaked. "I'm the —manager. What'd you want?"

I took off my hat. "If I could come inside a moment—"

"Sure. What the hell?"

I followed her down a musty hall, and into the room where the TV was playing. There was a strong smell of gin, perfume, powder, and bubble-bath in the surprisingly well furnished room. The woman—she said her name was Miss Kimmons—went over, turned off the TV, then swung back toward me.

She was about thirty-five, with a round, pretty face, smeared with too much makeup. Her hair was done up in thick blue-black coils on top of her head. She was, or seemed to be, more than a little drunk. I hoped so.

"Miss Kimmons, I want to find out about one of your tenants. Jack Mancino," I said. I carefully kept my eyes on her face—she had on a skin-tight, red-silk robe, and it was obvious there was nothing under it but her naked body.

"Mancino?" she said guardedly. "He has a room here, alright. But he isn't here now. Some lousy cop put the arm on him this afternoon, and——"

"I know about that," I broke in. "He got a bad deal." I laughed, and added, "I'm working for some people who'd like to help Jack out."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed to gleaming slits. "Oh? People with the initials 'L.P.' maybe?"

"You got it. You know Lee Peregrin, don't you?"

She shrugged. "Call me Sarah. Siddown and have a drink. Sure I know Lee—he owns this rattrap. I just run the place for him."

I didn't have to ask what was the main business of the place. One good look at Sarah Kimmons was answer enough.

"Where's Mancino now?" I asked.

"Ah, his lawyer checked him into some private hospital, where

the cops can't get to him," she laughed.

I perched on the edge of a chrome and leather chair, and waited impatiently for Sarah to get through fumbling around at a built-in bar across the room. She brought me a glass full of gin, seasoned with maybe a teaspoon of sodawater. Just the smell of it made me sick.

She flopped on a sofa facing me. The silky red robe fell away, giving me a view of her legs. She didn't seem to mind. Any other time, I might not have minded, myself.

She poured down half her drink, lowered the glass, and looked at me speculatively. The temperature in the room went up several degrees. I said carefully, "About Mancino. I'm double checking. Peregrin wants to be sure there aren't any loose ends the cops could latch on to. You know."

Sarah finished her drink, got up to mix a fresh one. "Nah," she said over her shoulder. "A few people around the bar down the street where Jack hangs out, they might know he travels with a carnival during the summer months. But I doubt he ever told them just what he does in the carnival."

I waited until she was back on the sofa. Then I grinned, winked, and said, "That was a slick trick Mancino pulled."

She almost strangled on her gin. "Man, I'd love to've seen that cop's face, when Jack came up with all

those red marks on him, at the jail," she whooped.

I set my still untasted drink on a table beside the chair. I leaned toward her. "What does he do with this carnival? What do they call his act?"

"Oh, hell," Sarah gurgled. She wiped tears of mirth from her eyes. "Some two-dollar word—'dermato'—something or other. Jack says his pitch goes over big with the rubes."

"I bet it does. You ever see him do it?"

"Yah, a few times. He's kind of sensitive about it—except when he gets paid. And, man, does he hate for anybody to touch him. The least little knock makes bruises on his skin."

I fought to keep my voice casual. "Uh huh. But exactly how does he work the trick, or whatever you call it?"

"Why, there's nothing to it. He takes a nailfile, anything like that, and drags it along his bare skin. And in a few minutes a big red welt swells up. The harder he scratches his skin, the bigger and uglier the welt is. Looks like somebody had belted him with a club."

I took a deep breath, let it out. I felt ten years younger than I had five minutes ago. "How long does it last?"

She waved her hand vaguely, slopping gin down the deep valley between her half-naked breasts. "Oh, hours and hours," she said. "One night he let me write my

name on his chest with the blunt end of a fork. Next morning, you could still see it. Kind of like a dull red neon sign, that spelled 'Sarah.'"

I got up. "Yeah. Well, I'd better be——"

"Hey, you ain't leaving?" She came to her feet, swaying from side to side. "I like you. I like big guys with wide shoulders and flat bellies."

I forced a smile. "Baby, there's nothing I'd rather do than stick around. But I can't."

As I talked, I edged toward the hall door. With a boozy giggle, Sarah lifted her hands to her head, did something to the mass of black hair. Suddenly it cascaded down over her shoulders. It reached all the way to her waist, and below.

She reeled toward me. "Look! You ever see a woman with so damn much hair? Nice, huh? And wait'll you see . . ."

But I didn't wait. I went out the door just as her red silk robe finally parted company from her naked body. Outside the house, I got in my car, started the engine.

I could still hear her yelling, "Hey, don't go——"

I added it up, as I drove away. In the last few hours I'd been framed, cussed, slugged, booted around, and shot at. And now damn near seduced by a lush with hip-length hair.

I said aloud, "What a night." I meant every word of it . . . and it wasn't over yet by far.

I found a phone-booth at an all-night service station. I looked up a number and dialed it. After several rings, a familiar grumpy voice came on the line. "Doctor Johns here."

I gave my name, then said, "Doc, I need some information."

"Ha," the doctor snorted. "From what I hear, you need more than that. I've known you a long time, Dave Weldon. I sure never thought you were the kind to slap helpless people around."

I said, "Doc, shut up, and listen a minute."

I told him what Sarah had told me, about Jack Mancino. When Doc replied, he'd forgotten to be mad at me. "Very interesting. Yes. It's known as 'dermatographia.' Roughly translated, that means 'skin-writing.' An abnormal condition of the—"

"Never mind that. But is it possible?"

"Certainly. A case as pronounced as the one you describe is rather rare. But by no means unheard of. I recall a fellow—"

"Okay, thanks, Doc. I'll check with you later."

He was still talking when I hung up. The puzzle was almost complete now. Only one missing piece. But it was a big one. I thought I knew where I'd find the answer.

The time was eleven-thirty. From now on I'd have to be very careful. Traffic had thinned out, and my car would be easier to spot. I won-

dered how many men were combing the city for me. Police, and also Lee Peregrin's boys.

Peregrin would know that Frankie Thomas fouled up at my apartment. But he wouldn't know how much talking Frankie might have done before he died. So Peregrin would be crazy-wild to get to me before the cops. And if Sarah gave him a call . . .

But I doubted that she would. She was too busy drinking.

It was raining again as I drove along wet black streets toward a residential neighborhood of small, neat homes, on the northwest side of town. While I kept a close watch for scout cars—or any car, whose occupants might show interest in me—in my mind I put the case together, piece by piece.

The police department, represented by my partner Pete Branden and myself, was about ready to fall like a ton of bricks on Lee Peregrin's narcotics racket. Peregrin knew we were getting close, and he was scared spitless.

To get the heat off himself, he turned it on the city cops in general—and me in particular, since I was one of the two men mainly responsible for gathering the evidence against him. He hired Mancino for the job of framing me.

Result—I'd be so discredited that any evidence I'd helped dig up wouldn't be worth a damn. No grand jury would return an indictment based on the testimony of a

sadistic, prisoner beating slob like me.

And of course, Pete Branden would be tarred with the same brush. The old guilt-by-association bit.

As a clincher, I'd be found dead in my apartment—a "suicide." That would be that.

The department would have to start all over, trying to re-build the case against Peregrin. But by then he'd be long gone, ready to set up operations in another city, in another state. But the success of the whole act depended on Mancino.

And we had him cold. I even knew what he'd used to raise the ugly welts on his abnormal skin. That damn tin spoon they'd given him to eat his dinner with, at the jail.

Mancino was through—and when he found that out, he would very likely spill his guts, giving us the link we needed to Lee Peregrin as the master-mind.

All I had to do was turn the car around, drive to the 15th Precinct, and lay it out for Captain Snyder. He, and the departmental brass, would have to buy my story. It would be easy enough to prove the part about Mancino.

Only—there was still that missing piece of the puzzle.

Because Frankie Thomas had made it clear that the frame had been constructed to fit me, Dave Weldon, personally.

And that meant—I didn't like to

think what it meant. But there was just one possible answer. I reached the residential neighborhood I wanted, cruised down a dark, peaceful street until I found the right house. I'd been there once or twice.

No car in the garage. A dim night-light glowing behind drawn blinds in the livingroom. I parked diagonally across the street. I waited. It was after midnight, and I wouldn't have to wait long.

Pete Branden wasn't a guy to hang around the station house once he'd finished a tour of duty.

I checked my gun, made sure all six chambers were loaded. I held the short barrel to my nose. The muzzle smelled strongly of burned powder. I hoped I wouldn't have to burn anymore, before the night was over. Pete Branden . . . my good old, loyal partner on the 15th Precinct detective squad.

I thought back over the weeks since he and I were teamed together to work on the Peregrin case. We weren't especially friendly—Branden was a few years older than me, and he had a wife and a couple of kids, and we just didn't have many common interests—but we got along well enough on the job.

Often I got impatient with him. He worked very slowly and methodically. Me, I like to move around, plunge into things. And now I remembered some vaguely puzzling things that had happened

during the Peregrin investigation. Things that Branden hadn't done, and questions he hadn't asked of some of our informants. But I hadn't given it a second thought, at the time. I did now.

And I remembered something my blonde girlfriend, Frances Kersh, had told me. About opening her apartment door, and finding Jack Mancino in the hall—looking at his watch. As if he were working on a schedule. He was.

The whole set-up was obvious. To begin with, Peregrin had known that Fran was my girl—he sent Mancino straight to her. Pete Branden was one of the very few people I'd told that Fran and I were engaged. The only one who knew Lee Peregrin existed, except as a name in the newspapers.

So Branden had to be the guy who passed the word along.

And it was Branden who saw to it that we were near Fran's place when Mancino roughed her up. Naturally, being the closest police unit, we'd take the squeal—as we did.

At the precinct, Branden had casually suggested that he'd stay behind to do the paperwork, while I took Mancino on downtown to the jail. He made a joke about it—how he'd let me have the easy job.

Yeah, it was obvious now. That didn't make it easier to take. A crooked cop is the lousiest—

I saw a car turning into the

street, two blocks away. Its headlights came steadily on, slowed, and turned into the driveway at Branden's house. Quickly I got out. I ran on tiptoe across the slippery wet street.

I stopped under a rain-dripping tree on the lawn between house and garage. Branden came out, pulled down the garage door. He stood there a moment, head bent, his big body drooping under his topcoat. Then he lifted a hand, smacked the open palm against the door—again and again.

He didn't hear me as I walked up behind him. I said softly, "Hello, Pete."

He whirled around. I showed him my gun, pointed at his belly. "Don't do anything wild," I said. "And don't give me any line of bull. I know you sold out to Peregrin, and I have proof enough to nail you for it. So let's take it from there."

I couldn't see his face in the black shadows. I was glad of that. He whispered, "No. Oh God, *no*."

When I told him to turn around and do a brace against the garage door, he obeyed, his body jerking like a puppet on strings. I took his gun and tossed it away.

"My wife, Dave," he said. "She's waiting up for me. And the kids—listen, don't make me go in the house. Please."

"Alright, alright," I said roughly. "My car's across the street. Lead off."

I put him in the front seat. Then I slid in under the wheel. My gun was in my left hand, aimed across my body at his big bulk. I told him the score.

When I finished, he said thickly, "That's about it. I hated to go along with the frame on you—believe that much, Dave. I was in so deep I didn't have any choice."

I asked the inevitable question—"Why?"

"Why?" Branden repeated. "You know what my salary is. And I got a wife and two school-age boys to support. Clothes, doctor bills, payments on that damn house, payments on my car, a thousand other things. And never enough money. Never. Then, when we started closing in on Peregrin, he made me an offer. A big offer, enough to pay off all I owe, with plenty left over. Christ, I couldn't turn it down. And all he wanted was for me to stall along on the investigation. Give him time enough to finish his business here and pull out."

He turned toward me on the seat. He said bitterly, "But you had to be a damn Boy Scout. An eager beaver. I knew you couldn't be bought. But Peregrin had to get you off his back. He put the screws to me—either you went, or I went. And I—I figured——"

I said, "Yeah. Sure. You figured it was a lot better if it was me. After all, you have a family to think about."

"Leave them out of it," Branden

snapped. "My wife don't know a thing about it. Just leave the family out."

I'd give him that much. I'd met his wife, and she wasn't the type to go along with crooked deals.

"This'll just about kill her," Branden muttered.

I believed that, too. But I didn't see any help for it.

Starting the car, I said, "You're going to make a phone call, Branden. I want Peregrin served up on a silver platter, like a roast pig with an apple in its mouth."

Branden made the call at the same phone-booth I'd used earlier. He said the right words—maybe because I had my gun jammed against the back of his head. But partly, I think he was glad it was all over for him. He had the look of a man who's been under heavy pressure, and suddenly the pressure is gone. After he hung up the phone, he said, "Okay. He'll meet me. The place is a country road —"

"I heard it. Let's go."

I decided to let him do the driving. I wanted both hands free. It was taking a chance—but what the hell else had I been taking all night?

We drove north, out past the city limits, into fairly open country. Then Branden wheeled the car off the highway and onto a winding, graveled country road. Half a mile further on, we stopped.

Peregrin wasn't there yet.

But only minutes later, a big black Caddy sedan eased along the road, and came to a stop several yards behind my car. The driver tapped twice on his horn. Branden did the same. Then the Caddy's lights went out.

Branden said, "He'll have a goon with him."

"Yeah. Get them out in the open. If you cross me, I'll chop you down first, no matter what happens after that."

His head turned toward me. "You didn't have to say that." He sounded like his feelings were hurt.

He got out, walked back in the direction of the other car. Slowly I slid across the seat, out the door, and crouched down in the inky darkness beside the car. I breathed through my mouth—I couldn't seem to get enough air into my lungs.

Now a man left the Caddy, came around to meet Branden in the space between the two cars. I heard the man's heavy, guttural voice, "What's up? Ain't I got enough trouble, without you wanting a meet? It better be worth my time."

It was Lee Peregrin. I could dimly make him out. He was a dumpy little man with a taste for expensive clothes, expensive cars, expensive women. Now he was just a short, fat shadow that stood facing Branden.

Branden asked, "You got a match, Lee?"

"Match? You know I don't smoke. It ain't good for you." Peregrin lifted his rasping voice, "Hey, Luke, bring this jerk a match."

Another man got out of the Caddy, on the driver's side. He came to join Branden and Peregrin. I took a deep breath and straightened up as a match flared in the darkness.

I yelled, "Raise them up high, boys!"

"What the hell," Peregrin squealed.

Branden said, "Better do it—there's cops all over the place."

The third man didn't waste time talking. He pulled a gun and blasted at my car. I fired back. He doubled over, then sprawled face down on the gravel road.

For a moment the yellow-red gunflashes blinded me. I ran forward, trying desperately to find Peregrin. Then Pete Branden loomed before me.

"Watch it, Dave—watch it!" he shouted. He lunged past me, just as red flame again cut the night. Peregrin had got around behind me. I hit the ground, rolled, came up on my elbows. Branden was down—he'd taken the slug meant for me.

Peregrin was near my car, shooting wildly. Something hit me like a sledgehammer, high on my left shoulder. I raised my gun. I aimed at the crouching black silhouette outlined against the lighter-colored car. I fired until my gun was empty.

Peregrin bounced off the car's rear fender, then crumpled to his knees. He was still on his knees when I got to him. Both hands were clamped to his fat belly.

He moaned, "Don't—no more, no more." It sounded like a prayer. He went over on his side. His short legs doubled up toward his chest. "No more," he prayed, and died.

I staggered to Peregrin's car, reached inside and flicked on its lights. I checked Branden. The bullet he'd taken for me had hit him in the middle of his forehead. He'd saved my life—at the cost of his own.

I turned to Peregrin's goon. One look told me he'd pulled his last trigger. I walked to the roadside ditch and vomited. By the time I finished, my shoulder was hurting like hell.

There was lots of blood, but no bones seemed to be broken. At least I could still move the arm. Though after I tried it once, I didn't try it again. I wadded a handkerchief and pushed it inside my shirt, against the wound.

I was having a hard time keeping my feet under me. I wondered if I could make the drive back to town. I didn't see that I had much damn choice.

Leaving the bodies where they were, bathed in the foggy yellow glow of the big Caddy's headlights, I got in my car and turned it around. I had to drive carefully to avoid running over Pete Branden.

Then I pushed the gas-pedal to the floor and headed for the city. I made it. But it's not a trip I enjoyed. At the 15th Precinct station house, I left the car parked in front. I staggered inside, up the stairs to the detective squadroom on the second floor.

Captain Snyder was still there. For a minute I thought he would have me thrown in a cell before I could open my mouth. Then he noticed the big red patch decorating the left shoulder of my topcoat. He and some of the boys on duty hauled me into his office and dropped me in a chair.

I gave them the location of the country road, and a man called central radio and put the message on the air. Within minutes, scout cars would be on the way out there.

During the time it took for a doctor to arrive, I sat in the chair, dripping blood all over the captain's nice clean floor. I gave Snyder a brief run-through of what I'd been doing that night. As I talked, his shaggy eyebrows climbed higher and higher.

Once he interrupted long enough to pick up his phone and say, "Send a cruiser for Jack Mancino. He's at the Memorial Hospital on Hartnell Street. Bring him to me—fast."

"Listen," I mumbled. "I'll give you the details in the morning. Right now I—"

"Jesus, what a crybaby." Then Captain Snyder dropped the tough cop act long enough to ask, "Dave,

I've noticed you haven't mentioned what Pete Branden was doing. How does he fit into the picture?"

I stared down at the floor that kept trying to spin away into blackness. "Pete? He was just trying to help me clear myself, Captain.

That's all. He got killed saving my neck. . . . His family can be proud of him."

After awhile, Snyder said quietly, "So the Peregrin case is closed."

"Yes," I said. "The case is closed —permanently."



A WOMAN'S WILES



BY

RAY T. DAVIS

She'd killed her husband and her mother-in-law. The jury had found her guilty in less than four hours. Every legal string had been pulled. It was hopeless . . . she would die tomorrow.

THAT DAY I felt like I was going to a wake. The matron led me down the corridor, past empty cells, while our footsteps echoed hollowly off the stone walls. She stopped at the last cell. "Your lawyer's here, Dearie," she called, and then beckoned me ahead. I had lagged behind, not because of my seventy-odd years; I figured even a condemned person deserves a little privacy. The matron went back to her desk without unlocking the cell. That was for what they called maximum security measures.

Mrs. Margaret Decker had always made my visits easy for me. No tears, no frantic pleadings. But then there was hope. Now there was almost none. I wondered how to tell her.

My misery must have showed in my face, for she took both my hands through the bars and held them comfortingly. "You poor man," she murmured; as if I was going to be electrocuted tomorrow night and not her.

I said, "You know the Governor turned down our appeal?"

She nodded. "It came over the radio awhile ago."

"We're not finished yet," I told her, trying to make my voice sound hopeful. "Tomorrow the court rules on our petition for a new trial."

"We'll find a way." She sounded mighty sure of herself. A younger man would have quickly believed her. Mrs. Decker was an attractive woman in her thirties, with jet black hair and the whitest skin I'd ever seen. Only now, looking at her closely, she seemed different. In spite of her six months in this airless cell, I swear her cheeks had acquired a rosy glow and her slim figure had rounded out nicely. I didn't like it. In Death Row people withered; they didn't blossom.

"You've changed," I said.

"I'm getting fat," she laughed, too gayly. "Chaplain Jameson brings candy twice a week." She pointed at a vase of prison-yard flowers on a stool alongside her bunk. "Warden Burns personally takes me fresh flowers. Those two men spoil me."

The flowers brightened the drab cell but Burns' name made me scowl. I didn't want to tell her, but that bull-necked character was writing a book on "How the Condemned Die," or something as grisly, and it angered me that he was using Mrs. Decker as a test animal, studying her daily reactions. Chaplain Jameson too, in his way, was doing lab work. Mrs. Decker

had never belonged to any church and this gentle little man was trying to lure her into his fold.

Any woman, I thought, with or without religion, could be here in Mrs. Decker's place. Any woman, that is, who married one of the Carl Deckers in this world. Less than a year after their marriage, Carl had taken his bride to live with his mother because Mom had always enjoyed paying his bills. Not long afterward he quit his job and went on a drunk that lasted seven full years—until that final day when his distraught wife heavily dosed his whiskey bottle with rat poison.

It was unplanned, an act of desperation by a woman trapped. She knew she would be caught and sent to prison. What she didn't know was that Carl's mother was a secret tippler who sneaked drinks from her son's bottle. Mom died too, and it was for her murder that Margaret was tried, convicted and condemned.

Hers was my last case before I retired after nearly fifty years as a trial attorney. In my day I had freed criminals charged with every city ordinance and state statute written. Yet for Mrs. Decker—one of the few who deserved a break—I failed. Maybe I was too old; but two murders made her case look twice as black. The jury was out only four hours.

"She'll never die," I had vowed to reporters after the trial. Now I knew differently. I had run out of

tricks and delaying tactics. I had exhausted every legal remedy available. Tomorrow's court plea was only a gesture.

By the minute I was feeling more morose. "You sure ought to see a doctor, Mrs. Decker," I mumbled, as if a doctor might accomplish what I couldn't.

She patted my arm. "You go now," she said gently. "Tonight Warden Burns is bringing my family physician to give me a checkup." Dryly, she added, "He can't understand why I'm not cracking up."

I couldn't either. I had to get out of there fast. The matron gave me a long look as I passed her desk at the end of the corridor.

My depression returned next morning after the court rejected my petition. I went back to my office and began clearing some of my things from the old rolltop desk. Funny, I could remember plainly the day I bought it; shiny new, rugged and efficient. And so was I, with my shiny new law degree. Now we both showed the scars of a half-century's service. Modern flat-top desks and young crew-cut lawyers were replacing our kind. We wouldn't even be missed.

A uniformed messenger brought in an envelope and I gave him a quarter. It contained a notehead from a Dr. North, stapled to a printed form like the kind used in physical examinations. "I don't know how this affects Mrs. Decker's position," the note said in big

scribbly writing, "but she wanted you to see it."

I read the report gingerly, feeling Mrs. Decker's physiology was none of my business, and then I came upon one statement that brought me up in my chair. Here it was! A way out, an escape from the death house for Mrs. Decker!

Suddenly I was out of legal retirement, and I didn't need to dust any law books to know where I stood. I started to phone the Tribune, then changed my mind; once they had termed me "an old trial horse lawyer." I got the City News Bureau instead, which services all papers, and asked for a press conference. "Bring some radio and TV men, too!" I added exultantly.

When the story broke a few hours later, it turned this town upside down. The Trib's headline said: "Condemned Woman Pregnant!" A tabloid played the lurid angle: "Six Months in Solitary—Three Months Pregnant!" In parentheses was a huge question mark.

As if they had interviewed Socrates himself, newsmen quoted me word for word: "An unborn child has recognized legal rights of his own under the law. The State cannot execute an unborn child for his mother's crimes. Society demands this woman's sentence be commuted."

I paced my office feeling like a young lawyer with a crewcut, waiting for public opinion to build up.

Newsmen phoned every few minutes. "Give us the lowdown, Pop," the Trib man begged. "How'd this dame get pregnant in solitary?"

I said benevolently, "The Lord works his wonders in strange ways." The reporter hung up, swearing.

At two o'clock a Methodist bishop gave a radio talk, asserting firmly that under moral law Mrs. Decker couldn't be executed. At two-thirty a Yale University law professor was interviewed. "It's Shakespearean," he declared. "Now, in the Merchant of Venice . . ." On the three o'clock newscast Governor Holman announced that he had commuted Mrs. Decker's sentence to life imprisonment. The announcer added, "In this state life means less than fifteen years."

Of course there was an investiga-

tion a few weeks later by a select committee, but nothing came out of it. I was called away from my busy practice to testify. The matron, bless her, confirmed that maximum security rules kept me out of Mrs. Decker's cell. I thanked them anyway for the fine compliment.

Hanging on my wall today is a large glossy photo made by a Trib man at the investigation. It shows the governor and Mrs. Decker at the head of the table, while around them are sitting a score of prison personnel. Mrs. Decker wears a cryptic smile; the smile was all they ever got out of her. In my spare time I often study this photo with a magnifying glass. Margaret seems to be smiling at Warden Burns and Chaplain Jameson, who are sitting stiffly together. But which one? Or is she smiling at them both?



It's 15 years that I've been tending bar at the Flamingo and I've seen the hoodlums come and go. Sometimes they go to jail. Sometimes they go on to bigger and more lucrative jobs in the underworld. And sometimes they just go. But the going of Temper Riley

sticks in my memory like nothing else.

Temper Riley was a big man in a lot of ways. A six footer with a chest like a barrel, he was the most respected and feared of the local boys. He was in on gambling and skylocking real solid. He toyed a



THE NUDE ABOVE THE BAR

BY MARVIN LARSON

It's fifteen years I'm tending bar at the Flamingo, a joint where half the customers are hoods. I do my work, keep my eyes open and my mouth shut, and hope to retire soon to a healthy and peaceful old age. Then in comes this square guy . . . Gil.

little with girls and dope. Now and then, when money was scarce, he engineered a heist. He had a lot of guys working for him and no one, absolutely no one, moved in on his territory without paying up. Not that he was selfish. He gave everyone a chance to make good. But no one made good without paying homage to Temper Riley. Those that tried learned their lesson the hard way. Riley wasn't called Temper for nothing. And he had had his reputation for well over ten years.

But then—then came a guy named Gil. I didn't know his full name. He came into the Flamingo once a month and always on the third Friday of the month. From the first, I figured him for a working stiff. He had mechanic's hands, scarred and hardened by too many scrapes and hammer blows. They were big meaty hands too and they were lined with the kind of dirt and grease that never comes out unless a guy stops working. I suspect that this guy Gil never stopped working. He was the steady kind. A real square. A guy that had no idea he was drinking in a bar where at least half the customers were members of the underworld.

But one thing made this guy Gil different right from the start. I've got three big paintings of naked women over the mirror behind the bar. Most everyone looks at them, but they're always kind of ashamed to look too long. Not this guy Gil.

The first time he ordered a beer, he looked up and saw the painting in the middle. "Gosh," he said. And he stared at that painting all night until closing time. From then on, he was a regular monthly customer. He had fallen in love with that painting and he couldn't look at it enough. He didn't care who knew it either.

The night that he got in trouble with Temper Riley was ordinary except that Temper was sitting next to him. This guy Gil, he smokes a pipe. And that night he knocked the ashes out in the ash tray on the bar. The noise he made was loud and Temper Riley didn't like it.

"Hey, buster," said Riley politely. "Knock that damn pipe out on the floor. You're busting my ear drums."

Now this guy Gil is a big man, big boned and tall and thick through the shoulders. He obviously isn't used to strangers telling him what to do, and turned kind of slow, looked Riley over and then snorted.

"Cover your ears," he said, and then proceeded to crash the pipe harder into the ashtray until finally, the ashes caught in the bottom came out.

Riley showed his temper. No one had talked to Temper Riley like that in a long time and he had too many friends watching to let it go, even if the guy named Gil didn't know better.

"What did you say?" said Riley. Gil turned his head lazily and sighed.

"I said: 'Cover your ears.'"

Riley shook his head, turned to his buddies as if to say: 'This boy needs a lesson.' Then he turned back to Gil who was now stuffing his pipe with fresh tobacco.

"My names Temper Riley," said Riley. "Maybe you've heard about me."

"Can't say that I have," said Gil. "My name's Gil."

All this time, Gil isn't looking at Riley. He's lighting his pipe and staring at that painting of the naked woman. Finally, Gil tipped his beer glass to his mouth. Riley lifted his elbow over the bar and gently knocked his arm up so that the beer spilled down Gil's mouth and onto his seude jacket. Such coolness I never saw. This guy Gil, he puts down his glass and doesn't even look at Riley whose wide mouth is one big grin. Slowly, Gil brushes himself off. Then he turned and smiled at Riley.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"What if I did?" said Riley.

Gil's answer was quick. He reached over, grabbed Riley's martini and threw it into his face.

"You shouldn't do things like that," Gil said.

Riley's reply was just as fast. He came at the still seated Gil with a right hook that would have taken his head off. But Gil ducked under

it and came up with one of his own. It connected right in the middle of Temper Riley's chin and a second later, he was out cold on the floor.

I expected Riley's friends to pile into Gil at that point and kind of hoped that he'd come out of it alive. But by now, Gil was standing up and he was a full head taller than Riley's friends. None of them had guts enough to do anything.

"You'd better go," I said to Gil.

"Sure," he said. Then he tossed his beer down, almost half a glass. "Sorry. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

And he walked out as if he didn't have a care in the world. Ignorance sure can be bliss sometimes.

Temper Riley was out for almost ten minutes. He must have been thinking about revenge all the time he was out because the minute his eyes opened, he reached inside his coat for his revolver.

"Where is he? Where is he? I'll kill the . . ." What he said wasn't very nice.

When his boys told him that Gil was gone, that they hadn't touched him and that no one had followed him, it was as if he would tear the bar apart. He kicked bar stools over, knocked a bunch of glasses from the bar and then, like a guy that's been in stir too long, started pounding the wall with his fist.

"I'll get that bum if it's the last thing I do. I'll pound him in pieces.

I'll—" Then he whirled on his first lieutenant who is known around the place as Beaky. "Where does he live? I'll get him tonight. I'll dump him in the river. The long ride, see."

But Beaky didn't know where Gil lived. Neither did anyone else. Exhausted, frustrated, Temper Riley finally sat down at the bar and demanded a bottle. He poured it himself and drank shot after shot until he could hardly hold his head up. And all the time he muttered and growled like an animal. Now and then, he'd brush his black hair back from his tiny blue eyes and say:

"No one does this to Temper Riley and gets away with it. Remember that, Percy."

"I'll remember," I said.

Then, just before he left, he said:

"If that guy ever comes in again, you get in touch. Understand?"

"I sure understand," I said.

I didn't expect to see Gil again. I figured that he was smart enough not to push his luck. But not that guy. On the third Friday of the month, at eight o'clock, in came Gil. And who was sitting at the end of the bar when Gil came in? None but Temper Riley himself.

For the past month, Riley had been in a glowering and foul mood. The least little thing would set him off and within the month, he had smashed in the faces of at least three of his boys for offences un-

known to me. But when he saw this guy Gil sit down at the middle of the bar in his usual place, Riley's face lit up like a neon sign. As for Gil, he didn't even notice Riley. He ordered his beer, lit his pipe and gloried in the beauty of the naked woman on the opposite wall. The thought of what might happen made me frantic. I couldn't help but like the guy, even if he was stupid, even if he was asking for it. I didn't dare talk to him except to take his order. So, I penciled a little note and when no one was looking, slipped it to him with some change. It said:

You just had a fight with one of the toughest mobsters in town. For your own good, get out of here quick and don't come back. A friend!

And how did this guy Gil react? It is sad to relate. He grinned at me. His long boney face just grinned. After that, I told myself I had performed my duty and that from now on, the square was on his own.

The minutes and hours clicked by that night and to the untrained eye, nothing happened and nothing was going to happen. But I haven't been bartending for 15 years for nothing and I could see the signs of a set up. Gil was busy talking to a stranger and was getting drunker and drunker. The stranger managed to stay sober. Gil, who usually left at midnight, stayed until clos-

ing time. Then as he tried to leave by the front door, he was told that it was locked, that he'd have to go out the back way. He went past me on the way to the back door and gave me a big drunken smile and said:

"Night, Percy." Then he stopped, looked around and kind of whispered. "Don't worry."

And away he went, to the back door, out into the alley. Just thinking of it made me sick to my stomach.

Naturally I didn't see what happened, but I heard about it fast enough. There's little to say. Six of Riley's boys jumped him as he came out the door. They black-jacked him to pieces. Then they carted him off to a spot some four blocks away and dumped him into another alley. They didn't want the Flamingo to get a bad name. Whether he was dead or alive, no one said. No one really knew. I checked the newspapers for the report of a stray body and found nothing so I figured that Gil had survived it. The hoods around here don't usually go in for killing. A good workover is considered sufficient to keep the unhappy and rebellious in line.

Temper Riley regained his good humor after that night. Despite his reputation as a tough, he's usually a pretty generous guy. He's free with the drinks and when one of

his men gets into a jam, he goes all out for them. I guess there's only two things that send his temper soaring: a guy that tries to cross him and a guy that doesn't show proper respect. Though I personally didn't approve of Riley's treatment of Gil, I could see the point of it. After all, a guy in Riley's position just can't afford to lose face—and especially with a square. It's undignified, as Riley might say. Very much so.

But there was one trouble in this whole affair. This guy Gil just didn't know about those things. He didn't know anything about mobsters and he didn't know anything about Temper Riley. That's the only way I can explain the fact that he came back, as scheduled, on the third Friday of the month following. He came through that front door at eight o'clock sharp and walked to his stool in the middle of the bar in the same loose jointed manner as always. He sat down, lit his pipe, ordered a beer and looked up at his naked woman. I gave him his beer and kind of shook my head.

"You sure must like that painting, Gil."

He smiled and I could see that his lower lip was still swollen. A ragged scar ran about two inches along his cheek bone too.

"There's nothing more pretty than a naked woman," he said.

"You ought to get married," I said.

"Oh, I'm married all right. For a long time now. I got a good looking wife and three fine boys. But a naked woman in a painting like that is different from a naked wife, no matter how nice looking the naked wife is. You know what I mean."

Despite my ignorance of married life, I saw the point. But I didn't see how that painting could be important enough to fight Riley and his mob and maybe get shoved out of things for good.

"Did you get home all right last month?" I asked.

His light complected face got red, as if he were embarrassed.

"It was a little rough," he said. "But I got home."

One of Riley's boys came in right then and so I took Gil's money and went to the cash register. If I seem a little craven about Riley and his men, I've got good reason for it. Riley owns half the bar and one word from him to certain parties and I wouldn't find a bartending job in the whole city. Since I'm ten years short of collecting my social security, I didn't feel like bucking the mob. Looking at the nonchalant way Gil drank his beer and the way he eyed that painting, I figured he'd never have to worry about collecting his social security.

But that was strictly my opinion. Gil sat there the whole evening, saw Riley's boys come in, one by one. He acted as if he didn't recognize any of them, but he did.

Whenever he spotted one that was in on the beating, his eyes followed him in the mirror. Finally, at eleven thirty, Temper Riley himself came in. Even then, Gil didn't react. He just sat there, took a sip of beer, a drag from his pipe, another sip of beer.

Temper didn't react quite so cool. He walked in as usual in his fast striding way, got half way to Gil, then stopped. A big grin grew on his face then and he continued on, past Gil and to the end of the bar where he could keep his eye on Gil. He ordered a martini and said:

"Has he said anything?"

I shook my head.

"He's a gutsy one. That tickles me. It tickles me real good."

"You want him to leave?" I said.

"Naw. Give 'em all the beer he wants. He's a customer, ain't he?"

"Yeah," I said.

And then for fifteen or twenty minutes, Riley drank. And all the time, he kept grinning at Gil. I guess he was so tickled he felt like busting out all over. Obviously, Gil didn't intend to say anything. But not Riley. He had to go over and do a little gloating.

"Give him a beer on the house," Riley told me.

I did. Gil asked me who bought it. I pointed to Riley. Riley waved at him and Gil smiled. I looked at Gil and said to myself: There is the most all forgiving guy in the world. Then Riley swaggered over

to him. I was standing close by and heard the whole thing.

"Sorry about the other night," Riley said.

"What other night?" Gil said. And his face got hard and the bliss I always saw in his eyes when he looked up at that painting was gone.

"Don't play dumb with me, kid," Riley said. Already, Riley was getting his temper up. Gil's face, his eyes, everything showed contempt and disrespect for Temper Riley. And Temper Riley, as I have said, did not like things like that.

"I'm not playing dumb," Gil said. "You mean the night last month or the night the month before?"

"Let's say I'm sorry about both nights." Then Riley slapped him on the back. "Kid, I like your guts."

Gil unwound himself from the stool and stood up. He was about an inch taller than Riley.

"Well, mister," said Gil. "I'll tell you plain. I don't like your guts at all."

And before Temper Riley had a chance to lose his temper, this guy Gil hauled off with a left and a right square in the middle of Riley's face and old Riley reeled back against the wall. Then this Gil caught him there with six or seven punches before he went down. Then two of Riley's boys jumped Gil and knocked him to the floor. Gil caught one with a kick flush on

the jaw. Then he grabbed the other one and beat his head against the tile floor. It was awful to hear.

As for the other Riley boys, they stayed out of it. There was something just too imposing about this Gil guy. Meantime, Riley came to life and like before, the first thing he reached for when his eyes opened was his gun. Then Gil, fast as a guy can see, kicked the gun out of his hand, grabbed Riley by both feet, lifted him up as high as his arms would reach and dropped him smack on his head. That was awful to hear too. It gives me a headache just to think of it.

Gil looked at me, then at the gaping mobsters, then back at me again.

"I guess it's time to go, eh, Percy?"

And out the door he walked, loose-jointed, nonchalant, as if he were just leaving a health studio. And again, no one touched him and no one followed him. And when Temper Riley started talking sense again, he had a tantrum like before and ended it with too much liquor. In fact, he made me stay until three o'clock in the morning while he drank himself into the mumblingest mobster that ever lived. And when he was done, he said two words to me, over and over again.

"He's dead. He's dead. He's dead."

I didn't get to sleep until well

after the sun was up. The more I thought about this guy Gil, the more I liked him. The fact that he'd be torpedoed out of existence didn't appeal to me. Besides, I kept thinking how he had a wife and three kids and that he didn't really start anything, that he just got in a little argument with the wrong guy. I wrestled with the problem until I thought I'd go nuts. I didn't get to sleep until I made up my mind what to do. I would tip him off. Sure, if Riley found out, I'd be dead. But I didn't think that Riley would find out. I didn't figure that a guy like Gil would tell anyone anything. He seemed like a safe risk.

The next afternoon I went to work on it. Gil! It could be his first name. It might be his last. I went to the phonebook and checked the "G"- "I"- "L" listings. There were two pages, everything from Gilberg to Gilyard. Eight hundred names. I called everyone of them and it took me four days. I asked the same questions: "Is Gil there?" If someone in the house called themselves "Gil", I asked if he ever went to the Flamingo Bar. No luck. Four days, every minute of my spare time—all down the drain.

Then I went to the yellow pages. He was certainly a mechanic of some sort. But what kind of mechanic? Where did he work? Body repair shops—four pages of listings. Garages—five pages. Service stations—12 pages. I remembered

his hands, the scars, the scrapes. A body man. That seemed the most logical. So I started to call. For two weeks, I called. For two weeks, I got the same answers. "No one by that name works here." Finally, I slammed the receiver down for the last time. It was no use. He could be a machinist, a maintenance man—anything. For all I knew, he probably worked and lived hundreds of miles out of town.

So, I kept on working as usual except for one thing. I kept my ears more wide open than ever. Before, I had made it a policy to know as little as possible, to keep my nose out of the affairs of gangdom. I was a bartender and a good one. That's all I wanted to be. I had always figured that their business was none of mine. Now I thought different. I wanted to know what was going to happen to this Gil. I found out too. Temper Riley has got one big fault as an operator. He's got a big and loud mouth and he likes to brag about his schemes. Right in front of me, he told one of his men what was going to happen to Gil.

It was an old and well tried trick in gangdom. Two out of town torpedoes had been employed. Riley didn't know them and didn't want to, but they had received the proper instructions. They were to be dressed as police officers. At exactly eleven o'clock, they were to walk in and arrest Gil. They would then take him to their car. Then they

would take him out of town and extinguish him. It was that simple. And Gil, being a square, wouldn't suspect a thing. He'd go with them like a smiling and happy baby.

The third week of the month came. Monday. Tuesday. Three more days and at eight o'clock, a guy named Gil would start his walk to an unmarked grave. Night after night, I served Riley his martinis and all I could think about was dropping a box of rat poison in each drink. As the day came closer, he got happier and happier. It was awful to see. His grin was almost perpetual. It was as if he were looking into his crystal ball and could see his victim writhing in agony with a bullet through his gut. They'd do it that way. They wouldn't make it fast. They'd have instructions to make it as slow as possible.

I thought of going to the police, but I didn't dare. Not that the cops in town wouldn't welcome a chance to get Temper Riley. They'd been trying to get something on him for years. The trouble was simply that Riley had spies planted all over the department. At least, that was the rumor. I figured my calling the cops was a good way to commit suicide. Still, if I contacted the right one, the one guy on the force that would move quietly—

Wednesday was over. Thursday morning, I picked up the phone and dialed the number of the po-

lice department. When they answered, I chickened out and hung up. Thursday was gone. On Friday, I paced back and forth across the floor of my apartment. I went for a long walk. I went back to my apartment and paced some more. Three times I picked up the phone. Three times I hung it up without doing anything. No guts. I started to hate myself. What the hell was a police department for? Weren't they there to protect guys like Gil from guys like Riley? The solution to everything was so obvious, but I couldn't do it. No guts. Fifteen years of working in the Flamingo Bar had had its effect.

I decided to call up work and tell them that I was sick. I didn't want to be around. I didn't want to see it. That's when the phone rang.

"Hello," I said.

"This Percy?"

"Yeah," I said. Then, at the same instant, I recognized the voice. "Gil?"

"Hey, how'd you know?"

I felt my stomach collapse.

"I've been thinking about you now and then," I said.

"I called the Flamingo and got your number," he said. "I just wondered about something. I'm in town and I was thinking of coming in tonight. But you know, I don't want to get beat up unless I have to." Then he told me about why he hauled off on Riley last time and how he got beat up in the alley the month before. "I don't

mind a fair fight now and then, Percy. But I sure don't like taking on half the city. You know what I mean."

"I sure do," I said.

"You figure that this Riley-fellow will be laying for me?"

"I know it," I said. "If I were you, I'd never come back to the Flamingo again. I got my reasons for saying that."

"Oh no," he said. "You got me wrong, Percy. That's a public place and I'm not going to stop going there just because of a bunch of hoodlums. I just wondered if maybe I shouldn't bring some of my friends along to even things out a little."

I tried to tell him that all the friends he had in the world wouldn't help him against the mob, that they'd get him no matter how many friends he had, that he'd probably get his friends killed on top of it.

"Well, I wouldn't want anything to happen to my friends on my account. But gosh, Percy, I can't back down. That bunch in there is just a bunch of two-bit crooks. You wouldn't want an honest man to back down in front of one of those guys, would you?"

"It'd be safer," I said.

"I guess that settles it," he said. "I just got to come in tonight."

"No," I said, and I practically yelled into the phone. Then I told him about the plan, what they were going to do. "Will you get that

through your thick skull? They're going to kill you; they're going to shoot you down. And by the time those torpedoes get done, there won't even be a body to bury."

"What's a torpedo?" said Gil.

I groaned.

"A hired killer," I said. "Mobsters like Riley bring them in from out of town so none of the local boys get in trouble. They're experts, Gil. They make their living killing people. They don't know who they work for and they don't know the victim. They don't care about either. All they work for is a fee."

"How do they know who to kill? They've never seen me."

"Don't worry. Temper Riley will have a fingerman there to point you out."

Gil snorted.

"I don't have to take nothing from scum like that." His words were suddenly clipped and angry. "I'll be there tonight, Percy. You damn right I will."

He hung up. I didn't get a chance to argue with him. He just plain hung up.

I put my apron on at five and started serving up drinks as usual. I kicked myself for coming. I felt as if I were walking into a slaughter house. Still, I couldn't keep myself away. This guy Gil, he knew what to expect. What would he do? He had said something about bringing friends with him. That

might help. I doubted it, but it might. As for Riley's torpedoes, what would they do when they ran into trouble? Would they blast him on the spot? Would I have to stand there behind that bar and watch a real good guy get blasted?

I mixed drinks with a fury. I pretended that this guy Gil was inside my shaker. It was all his fault. I'd warped him. What more could I do? If he got the works, it was his fault, not mine. The hell with him.

Seven o'clock came. Seven-thirty. Seven-forty-five. Finally, eight o'clock. I watched the door, waited for it to open on schedule. Nothing happened. I looked down at the other end of the bar. Temper Riley sat there grinning, waiting for his big fat revenge. It was stupid of him to be there. He knew it too. But Riley, he just couldn't resist a last look at the guy named Gil. He wanted to gloat. He wanted to say goodbye with a sweet smile. It appealed to his sense of humor. It tickled him.

Five after eight. Still no Gil. Maybe he had changed his mind. Maybe I had penetrated that thick skull of his after all. I started to feel lighter. The beer bottles weren't so heavy and the tightness disappeared from the back of my neck. But it didn't disappear for long.

He walked in and sat down at his usual place as if he owned the joint. Damned if he wasn't dressed up in a neat blue suit, a white shirt

and red tie, as if he were ready to be layed out. He nodded to a couple of guys that he evidently knew and then stuck his pipe in his mouth and lit it.

"How about a beer, Percy?" he said.

I gave it to him and felt like throwing it in his face. Who did he think he *was*? God or something? Then he really got me sore. He picked up the glass of beer and turned toward Riley at the end of the bar. Riley had that big grin on his face and Gil grinned right back in the most impudent way imaginable. Then he hoisted his beer glass to the naked woman in the painting, nodded to her and drank.

I went about my business and kept one eye on the clock and the other on the customers. Nine o'clock. Ten o'clock. During all that time, something was going on but I couldn't figure out what it was. Every fifteen or twenty minutes, some strange guy would come up to Gil and say something to him. Gil would say something back and then the guy would walk down to the end of the bar and stand near Temper Riley. Each one ordered a drink. Ten minutes later, the guy was gone, evidently out the back way. It was obvious that Gil had plenty of his friends in the place. But where did they disappear to? Why? What were they doing?

The time got to be ten thirty, then a quarter to eleven. Fifteen

minutes to go. Gil ordered another beer. I gave him one and said:

"Get out, Gil. For God's sake, get out."

He just smiled at me as if he were deaf or something.

Then things started to move. A short, round little man came in the front door. He looked around, spotted Gil and walked quickly to his side. I was right there and I heard him say:

"We found the pointer-outer."

"Good," Gil said. "Take his place."

The little round guy headed back to the front door again, turned around, looked the bar over and then left. About two minutes later, two brawny cops entered. There was no question about it in my mind. The cops were torpedoes. Murder was written all over their faces. They stood by the door for a full minute and their eyes moved restlessly down the length of the bar. One of them chewed on a toothpick. The other one just grinned. Then they started to walk, slowly, toward Gil. Gil had his beer glass in his hands and his eyes watched them in the mirror. He sipped his beer. The cops moved up, then past him and down to the end of the bar. They stopped behind Temper Riley.

"You're under arrest," the grinning cop said to Riley. Then like lightning, he slapped the cuffs on Riley's wrist.

"I'm not Gil," Riley hissed.

"That's what they all say," said the cop. "Come on."

The cop yanked Riley off the bar stool.

"You got the wrong guy," Riley whispered, loud enough for me to hear. "The guy you want is over there. The guy drinking beer."

"Sure," the grinning cop said.

"These guys are all my friends," Riley whispered again. "They'll tell you."

"What's the trouble, Gil?" one man said.

"Pick up a speeding ticket, Gil?" another man said.

Temper Riley whirled around as if bitten by a tarantula. He looked wildly at the strange faces that stared back at him. Always his boys stood behind him while he drank. But this one night, they were suddenly gone. He was alone. And the strangers that pretended to know him kept making remarks, kept calling him Gil.

"Stop calling me that name," Riley cried. "I'm Riley. I'm Temper Riley."

"Never heard of him," said the grinning cop.

And they dragged him toward the front door.

"You got the wrong guy," he yelled. "That's him there. I'm not Gil. I'm Riley. I'm—" His face was a deep red, his eyes wild. Then he spotted me. "Percy. Percy. Tell 'em."

His voice was a scream as it went out the door. I didn't get a chance

to answer. If I had had that chance, I don't know to this day what I would have said. Probably nothing. I was too stunned to speak. It all happened within minutes.

A guy at the bar said:

"Those cops sure can be rough sometimes."

"They're not the only ones," I said.

I stared open-mouthed at Gil whose eyes were lost in that painting of the naked woman. I looked at all the people congregated at the end of the bar near the empty bar stool that Temper Riley had always occupied. There were at least ten guys standing down there and everyone was a stranger to me. Suddenly I got the picture. Gil's friends. The ones that had talked to him. They had ordered their drinks while standing by Temper Riley. Then they had disappeared. Somehow, each one had disappeared with one of Riley's hench-

men. It all happened smooth and slow, so smooth and slow that no one noticed it. Not even Riley himself.

I went up to Gil and gave him a beer on the house.

"I can guess what happened to the fingerman," I said. "But what happened to Riley's men?"

"Oh," Gil said. "I guess they were doing kind of a land office business tonight: making loans and lining up girls for a big party. I guess they haven't seen so much business in years." Then he took a great big swallow of beer and looked up at that naked woman of his. "Ah, Percy," he said. "There's just nothing more pretty than a naked woman. Just nothing."

And he stayed there, smoked his pipe, drank his beer and stared in that dreamy way of his at that painting, right up till closing time. It sure was something blissful to behold.



TURNER DUNN died badly. He died like a shot 'possum on the wet ground at the splayed roots of a big black gum stump he had been sitting on when the shot was fired. He died bleeding from the mouth, kicking in the loose, dry leaves and twisting in the mud beneath them.

and still running until the running gives out and the legs fold up like an ironing board. Not cleanly and unbelievably quick like a wildcat, down and already dead before even the echo of the rifle shot dies, nor calmly slow like a partridge, limp and softly held and still alive in the

AN ASPECT OF DEATH

Coffee squatted on the ground, the rifle cradled across his lap, and smoked a cigarette . . . and watched Turner Dunn die.

BY

JAMES L. LIVERMAN

Coffee watched him die, squatting on the ground, silently smoking a cigarette. The cigarette butt burned down and burned his fingers while he watched. Turner Dunn died slowly, not slowly and ponderously like a bear, nor like a deer, shot running, already dead

dog's mouth, but like a 'possum shot on the ground and dying with its tough prehensile tail curling around nothing, disgusting, obscene, spraddlelegged and back hunching, fighting, and in the end not fighting death but life, trying desperately to force out that last

useless, hurting fragment of life hung like broken glass or a fish hook in its bowels.

When Turner Dunn was dead, Coffee stood up and walked back through the woods, going the same way he had come, following the same trail Turner Dunn had made and he had followed. As he walked he brushed over the trail behind him with a bough broken from a blown-down pine. He did not bother to cover the trail too carefully. It was not much of a trail, anyway, and there were not any trackers who could follow it, except himself, unless somebody thought to bring in blood hounds, and if they did they would not know where to start them. He did not think the body would be found for a long time.

It was bad about Turner Dunn. He had deserved at least a chance to die better. Coffee remembered that when he was young he had thought that death always came cloaked in dignity, no matter what the circumstances of dying, but he knew later, in the war, that that was wrong. It was not dignity but only a solemnity that made the illusion. After awhile, after so much dying, the solemnity had worn thin and he had seen death as it was.

It seemed to him that in a case like this there were always two laws and that you were expected to obey one at the expense of the other and at the expense of yourself and of somebody else, because the other

law, the written one, was always supposed to apply only to general cases and to impersonal things, involving people you don't know that you read about in newspaper stories, and not to specific and personal cases like this.

It was a long walk back through the woods and it was almost dark when he reached home. His wife was in bed and it was dark in the room with the shades drawn. He stood at the door, looking toward the bed, and then he went in and pulled the light cord.

"Did you find him?" asked his wife.

"Yes."

"Did you—" She didn't finish the question and he didn't answer. His wife turned her face away from him, toward the wall. He went to a corner of the room far from the bed and sat down in a chair, looking at her.

"I ought to shoot you, too," he said.

She looked at him again. "He hurt me," she said. "You don't know how bad he hurt me."

"You played with him," said Coffee. "You kept trying to start something and all the time you knew that he was the kind of man who might not take no when the time came."

"I didn't," she said, shaking her head with her eyes shut.

"I ought to shoot you, too," said Coffee. He stood up.

"Where are you going?"

He stopped. He hadn't thought about where he was going but he said, "To town."

"What for?"

"Maybe I'll get drunk. I don't know."

"Are you coming back?"

He went out of the room. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know yet."

He left the house, walking toward town.

I don't know why I told her that, he thought. I knew then I wasn't coming back. I can't go back.

He saw a partridge dusting in the road ahead of him. It was late summer and the partridge was tame and let him approach very

close before it flew.

He kept walking. After awhile he thought, and I don't know anywhere else to go.

Maybe, he thought, the way it is, sometimes a man has to go back to where he came from to see where it is that he was going.

He stopped at a service station on the highway. It was dark then. Inside, three men were playing black-jack for nickels and dimes at the counter. One of them said, "Coffee, have you seen Turner Dunn? His old lady's been calling."

"I've seen him," said Coffee. "You better make your game short. I've got to call the sheriff about something down the road."



I WOULDN'T want you to think that I don't like men. It's just that I've known for a good ten years—ever since the hired hand on my daddy's farm followed me into the barn when I was twelve—that they're only interested in one thing. Knowing this has gotten me into the work that I do; but I won't even pretend that I don't get a tremendous thrill out of it each time, and a personal satisfaction that goes 'way beyond doing my job or earning my living.

Take last Sunday. I wasn't really looking for a night out; I'd just dropped into the *Lonesome Pine* for a beer after the movies. It's a narrow little bar between two pawn shops on Washington Avenue in the part of Minneapolis they call "skid row". As I raised my glass—they're only a dime and awfully big—this fellow laid a hand on my shoulder.

"How about a fresh beer, baby?"

He was a big man with a red face and he wore a storm coat and an expensive hat. But I was just there for a beer, so I said:

"No thank you, I don't drink with strangers."

"I'm no stranger, baby; I've seen you somewhere before." Men always get around to saying that so it never bothers me much.

"I'm sorry—one is always my limit."

Just then Joe came in the back door. He's nice but he's not very bright. Here it was nearly zero that

NIGHT OUT

She was a bachelor girl, and attractive to men. And when she had a night out . . . it was murder.

BY
JOE GORES

night and all he had on was a pair of coveralls, and great big overshoes all buckled up, and a little white cloth apron that said *Master Lumber Co.* on it. He wore a workman's cap, too, with about twenty different out-of-date union buttons on it.

"Hey, Joel!" shouted Frank, who plays the drums in the band. "Did you bring your mouth organ with you tonight?"

"No—I'm too smart to bring my mouth organ to a place like this."

"Too smart, eh Joe?" Frank looked around and winked and a lot of people laughed. "I guess you are at that."

Joe shines shoes for a living. The wooden box he uses for a shine kit has a Kansas license plate nailed to it, a real one, and little miniature Minnesota and Wisconsin and Michigan license plates like used to come in Wheaties boxes. He started shining his flashlight on my legs, but I didn't mind; I've got nice legs and the man in the storm coat was looking at them.

Joe said to me: "Frank asked did I bring my mouth organ along and I told him no, I was too smart to bring it to a place like this."

"I didn't know you had a mouth organ, Joe," I told him.

"Sure I do." He held out his hands about a foot apart. "A big one I got, two tiers. I play it all the time."

I never laugh at Joe like the others do; I understand him.

"I don't drink that damn stuff," he said all of a sudden. "It tastes like people wash their feet in it. I drink whiskey sometimes."

"On Sundays they only sell beer."

"Whadda ya mean? They sell Seven-Up."

He started blinking his light at the man in the storm coat, who growled like a bear and turned away. I could see that Joe bothered him, so before I even thought I said:

"He's not a very nice person, Joe. He made some insulting remarks to me just before you came in."

Joe walked right up to him and grabbed his arm.

"Whadda ya mean, talkin' to the lady that way? I shine shoes and pay my union dues; weren't for the union wouldn't get your gaddam shoes shined, whadda ya think of that?"

The man in the storm coat didn't say what he thought of that. He just jerked his arm loose and hit Joe right in the mouth. Joe fell down and his shine kit broke open and his flashlight went under the juke box. When he tried to get up, the man in the storm coat grabbed a bottle off the bar and hit him right on the side of the head with it, so the glass broke and cut Joe's face. Everybody stood up to see and someone screamed. The big man's eyes were all scared and wild, and I could feel the blood pounding in my temples.

Just then two cops came in; they always travel in pairs on Washington Avenue and are the biggest cops in Minneapolis.

"Okay, break it up." One of them had his club out and everything. "What happened here?"

"This crazy loon attacked me, so I poked him one. When he tried to get up he . . . knocked my bottle off the bar. I guess it broke and cut him."

"That the way it happened?" The cop with the billy club looked sharply around. After a minute Frank, who'd gotten off the bandstand, spoke up:

"That's right, officer. Joe there shines shoes around the neighbor-

hood. He's kind of a psycho, everyone knows that."

"You'll have to come down to the station house if you want to swear out a complaint, mister."

"Just get him out of here," said the man in the storm coat. He was sweating. "I don't want to bother with him; I don't want him near me."

"Your business, Jack." The cops took Joe's arms and hauled him off the floor. "C'mon, pal," said the second one, "We'll have the police surgeon take a look at that head."

After they were gone the man in the storm coat came over to me. He had a nice man-smell of shaving lotion.

"Baby, why'd you sic that screw-loose on me? I didn't mean to hurt him, but psychos give me the wil-lies."

When he mopped his face with his handkerchief his hand was shaking, but his eyes still had the same look as before; I knew right then that I was going to have a night out after all. I made my eyes flash.

"You're a cruel man!" I exclaimed loudly, so people turned to look. "Hitting Joe with that bottle just because he stood up for me!"

Then I buttoned my coat around me and flounced out without looking back, so everyone saw me leave alone. In the street I turned left, toward the bridge, and walked slow. Sure enough, I'd gone only a block when I heard his heavy footsteps in

the scrunchy snow behind me.

"Hey, look, baby, I wasn't being fresh back there."

"I knew you'd follow me."

He fell into step beside me. "You're a funny one. I thought you were sore 'cause I was such a brute."

I shook my head and giggled. "No you didn't, or you wouldn't have come looking for me."

"Hey, you're pretty sharp!" His eyes, going down to my legs again, tried to undress me. "What's a sharp chick like you doing in that cheap dive?"

"Just a beer after the movies."

At the next intersection he took my elbow as if to keep me from slipping on the ice, and then put his arm around my waist. We turned down a side street and I leaned closer against him. He let his hand touch my breast. When we came to an alley alongside a grubby brick apartment building, I said:

"I live down there in the basement apartment."

"Alone?"

"All alone. When a girl has a roommate she can't do the things she wants."

We were in black shadow. There were three steps down and a niche in the wall that was just right. When I stopped he crowded up close against me. His voice was low and throaty.

"Are you going to invite me in, baby?"

I stood on tip-toe and kissed him,

long and passionately like the movies. Then I drew back and rummaged in my purse as I always do, whispering: "I'll get the key."

He was tall and strong, and his face looked like the hired man's when I was twelve, just as I'd known it would, so I brought my right hand out of my purse and drove the ice-pick up into the bottom of his chin. My pick is filed down to five inches and I keep the point real sharp, so it goes in all the way to the wooden handle.

For a few seconds he just stood there swaying, a shocked look in his eyes; then he made that noise in his throat that they all make, and slid down the brick wall and tipped over sideways with his shoulder wedged against the door.

Looking down at him I felt awfully glad and all warm and sleepy inside, because he'd been another nasty man like the others. I pulled

out my pick and wiped it on his shirt and put it back in my bag; then I went through his pockets and took the money from his wallet. He had a lot of money. I left him there and walked home.

I was talking with the waitress down at the corner today, and I think that this afternoon I'll buy a Greyhound ticket to Chicago. From what she told me, there are even more men in Chicago who try to pick up girls in bars than there are in Minneapolis; I ought to have some nights out that I'll never forget. I'll probably be able to start a savings account, too, because some of them are sure to be convention-goers with big expense accounts. I have to think about things like that; even though I'm working for the safety of all American women, I won't have any Social Security to fall back on when I'm ready to retire.

ODDS WAS sitting in a bar listening feverishly to the radio. He had his last fifty bucks on Johnny B in the seventh and he sat and sweated as the announcer chanted the last furlong.

"... It's Six-shooter, Johnny B and Carry-All. Six-shooter on the rail and moving away . . . It's Six-shooter gy three-and-a-half lengths, Johnny B a length, Carry-All a neck, Perdido, Lovin' . . ."

"Shut that thing off," said Odds, bitterly. He was a short man with a pudgy face and rapidly thinning hair and he had just gone broke.

The barkeep snapped the radio switch and shook his head.

"Eighteen days", he said. "You ain't had a winner so long the bookies could move to Bermuda!"

"Ah shaddup," said Odds. "How about another drink?"

"Unh unh," said the bartender. "No more credit. You still got three bucks on the tab."

"Aw, come on f' chrissakes! I got a sure thing tomorrow. Nine-to-one and there isn't a horse runs fast enough to smell him."

"And what you going to bet with?" asked the bartender amiably. "Bookies don't give credit."

"Well," said Odds, leaning confidentially over the bar and lowering his voice, "I was thinking if you would . . ."

The bartender stepped back as if he'd been shot.

"Oh no! You'll get no more cash out of *this* barkeep!"

"But just . . ."

THE SURE THING

BY

BERNARD EPPS

"... It's Six-shooter by three and a half lengths, Johnny B a length, Carry-All a neck, Perdido, Lovin' . . ." Odds was a short man with a pudgy face and thinning hair . . . and he had just gone broke.

"Save your wind, Odds." He moved down the bar to serve a couple of working stiffs.

Odds cursed under his breath and walked to the door.

"Thanks a million, bud," he said sarcastically. "Eight-to-five you don't die in bed!"

The bartender ignored him and Odds pushed through to the street.

Three-and-a-half lengths, he thought. A sure thing at forty-to-one and he gives three-and-a-half-lengths! Odds, my boy, you're losing your touch.

He walked stoop-shouldered and despondent in the gathering dusk, his hands deep in his pockets. He mentally considered each of his acquaintances in turn and each was in turn rejected for one reason or another. Most of them believed Odds was washed up as a horse-player. Others had lost money on his tips.

Eighteen straight days, he thought. Eighteen straight days without a winner! Maybe I ought to quit this racket and go to work. Get a joint like Skip, maybe, and never sweat a losing day. And it's six-to-one even Skip won't help.

Skip was his brother; his 'kid' brother, no less. He ran one of the most successful night clubs in town, The Blue Moon. Its neon blinked mockingly at Odds as he turned the corner. He descended four steps to the door and went in.

Kranz, Skip's bouncer and general bodyguard, was polishing glass-

es behind the bar. He had once lost a wad of dough on one of Odds' tips and had held a grudge ever since. His brutal eyes followed as Odds walked back to his brother in a rear booth.

Skip was drinking coffee and reading the comic page of a newspaper.

"Hello Skip," said Odds sitting down.

"Hey, this Dagwood character slays me!" giggled Skip. "He goes out to mail a letter, see, and these cops are chasing some guy and . . ." His thin voice dissolved in a long bubbling laugh.

Odds waited until the giggles ran down.

"Skip," he began at last.

"Yeah, Odds."

"Skip . . ." He decided to lay it on the line. "Skip, I need a stake. Just 'til tomorrow. There's this nag in the sixth. Nine-to-one and it's a sure thing!"

The smile vanished from Skip's face. He stared for a moment over his paper, slowly folded it and laid it deliberately beside his cup.

"No dice, Odds," he said at last.

"But, Skip, it can't miss! Lend me a C-note and . . ."

"No dice!" Skip took a delicate sip of coffee, careful not to dampen his thin line of mustache.

"But, Skip, it's nine-to-one!"

"Get out, pony-boy, before I call Kranz."

Odds spread his soft hands and pleaded with his eyes. "But I'm

your brother, Skip!"

"Kranz!"

"Okay, okay," said Odds standing up. "But I'll give you four-to-one . . ."

His offer was cut short by a brawny arm around his neck. His right wrist was twisted viciously back and up and Kranz rushed him to the door, kicked it open, and slammed him into the concrete steps.

Odds lay still until the dizzying pain ebbed enough for him to stand. He felt a slight cut on his cheek and spat a little blood but nothing was broken.

Kranz stood in the door grinning and chewing a toothpick.

"Some brother," Odds shouted. "Even money the joint burns down."

He stumbled up the steps and walked slowly away. Night had dropped soundlessly into the streets and the traffic was thinning. Neons hummed and sputtered and winked at deserted pavements.

He walked aimlessly, battering his mind for a way to pick up a stake, checking through all his acquaintances again and again and wishing he had something to hock. He was in a district of pawn shops and cheap bars and he passed the little florist shop where he had placed his bet that morning.

Fifty bucks at forty-to-one; he thought. That would have been, lets see . . . four times fifty . . . two thousand dollars. Two grand!

And three-and-a-half lengths from the wire. Should have bet to place. Can't collect on a . . .

And then it came to him! He stopped dead on the pavement and looked back at the tiny florist shop.

Suppose, just suppose, someone heisted that bookie. Who's the bookie going to call? He certainly can't call the cops. He can't call the syndicate goons because he don't *belong* to the syndicate. He can't even tell his customers. Who's gonna bet with a book that loses his scratch? And if that bookie *were* held up, the fella who did it would have a nice little stake for the Florida Races. I've always wanted to see the Florida tracks!

He slammed one fist into the palm of the other and chuckled in sudden glee. *It's a sure thing!* he thought.

He walked slowly past the florist shop that was the bookie's front and glanced from the corner of his eye to see if he had any customers. Only the bookmaker was inside, his back to the window, watering a potted plant.

Odds stuck his right hand in the pocket of his coat and stiffened two fingers. He looked down and chuckled again. Anyone betting it wasn't a gun was backing a long shot. And bookmakers always rode with the odds.

He glanced up and down the empty street, turned and went inside.

"Give me the money, mac," he

said, showing the bulge in his pocket.

"Sure," said the bookie quickly. "Sure." He took a wad of bills from his pocket and held it out. "Two grand," he said. "Six-shooter disqualified and placed last. You're

the luckiest joker I've seen today."

Odds gulped and stared stupidly at his winnings. He licked his lips, opened and closed his mouth and finally mumbled;

"Luck nothing. It was a sure thing!"



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